As COVID-19 cases triple in a month, Latin American elites press ahead with back-to-work campaign

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The World Health Organization reported Wednesday that the fastest surge of COVID-19 is taking place in the Americas, which now has half of the 9.1 million confirmed cases globally, despite representing under 13 percent of the world population.

In a press briefing, Dr. Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the regional WHO office, lamented a tripling of confirmed cases in one month across Latin America and the Caribbean, from 690,000 to more than 2.1 million. The United States saw a 46 percent increase during the same period to a total of 2.4 million cases, the highest in the world.

The same day, Latin America and the Caribbean crossed the grim milestone of 100,000 coronavirus deaths, more than doubling in the last month. The virus has claimed more than 485,000 lives globally.

Brazil has recently been reporting the highest daily infections and deaths in the world. On Wednesday, Latin America's largest country recorded 1,185 deaths and 42,725 cases, reaching the totals of 53,830 deaths and 1.19 million cases. Most countries in the region are now seeing increases in new daily deaths, with the highest increases in Chile, Peru and Mexico.

Dr. Etienne added that for the first time there is "widespread transmission" of the virus in Central America, where cases rose 28 percent in a week to nearly 60,000 and deaths increased 22 percent to 1,564. In the Caribbean, the neighboring countries of Haiti and Dominican Republic are experiencing the largest outbreaks.

The acceleration of the pandemic across the Americas is being driven by the lifting of restrictions on economic activities. This has been done to impose a prompt return to work and an aggressive increase in production, a central aim of which is to attract global finance capital as it scours the globe for profits to pay for the trillions in corporate bailouts by governments across North America and Europe.

While the fascistic president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, has expressed this policy most clearly, insisting that COVID-19 is a "little flu," all governments across the region are systematically abandoning their measures to contain the virus. Their policies have instead been aimed at defending the profit interests and wealth of their respective capitalist elites in the most unequal region of the world.

In Mexico, which is consistently reporting more than a thousand deaths and record new cases daily—surpassing 25,000 total deaths and 200,000 cases—the "left" populist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador is calling on the population to "enjoy the sky, sun and fresh air."

As a result of such class-war policies, cases are growing fastest in the poorest neighborhoods, whose residents face overcrowding and limited access to potable water, health care, food, cooking gas and sanitation facilities. These areas are also most prone to underreporting of cases and even deaths.

An analysis by *Forbes* magazine published Wednesday found that in Mexico City, the epicenter of the accelerating pandemic in Mexico, "the worst-affected areas… are heavily populated low-income districts such as Iztapalapa, Ciudad Neza and Ecatepec." Nearly 8 out of every 10 patients who have died in the city were never connected to a ventilator.

In the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires, where president Alberto Fernández decreed yesterday the ending of obligatory quarantines for much of the country, more than 42 percent of COVID-19 cases and the largest recent surges have been reported among the 2 million people who live in the *villas* or slums.

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For the PAHO and epidemiological experts, the central concern is that workers are being driven back to workplaces by halting any economic assistance to laid-off workers and the hundreds of millions who survive day by day in the "informal sector" that is being decimated by the crisis.

In her most severe warning during the pandemic, Dr. Etienne said on Wednesday: "We will not overcome this crisis without addressing the needs of the most vulnerable: those most likely to fall sick and the least likely to receive care, such as indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, the urban poor and migrant populations. If we neglect them, we run the risk of the next two years looking like the past few months."

Dr. Etienne insisted on the "early detection of suspect cases, laboratory testing, contact tracing and quarantine as the foundation of a targeted and sustainable strategy to control COVID-19," and said that "the risk of reemergence will always remain unless we flatten the curve regionally and globally."

Yesterday, epidemiological researchers at Santiago University in Chile echoed the PAHO's warnings in criticizing the regional quarantines in Chile. Dr. Angélica Verdugo said that "the issue consists in the conditions of enormous inequality for those quarantines… If only 57 percent of the poorest [two quintiles] has received aid in money or food, it means that they are in no condition to obey the quarantine because they have no food security."

Dr. Verdugo then denounced the economic pressures to force workers to return to nonessential workplaces. "And those forced to go to work are the poorest people, those with scarce resources."

The directives by health experts, however, are falling on deaf ears.

Regionally, the earlier lockdowns, which were not even implemented in some countries, are being replaced by colored maps and "semaphores" with varying levels of restrictions. While often claiming to base their decisions on undisclosed "epidemiological reports," government officials are justifying the reopenings on the basis of protecting "productive life" and "economic development," regardless of the rising toll in human lives.

The social conditions underlying the developing social catastrophe across Latin America are the product of a century of neocolonial plundering of the region's resources and labor by US and European imperialism. Nonetheless, all established political forces in the region—from the fascistic regime in Brazil and the right-wing governments in Colombia, Chile and Bolivia to the "left" nationalist authorities in Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela—are intent on further subordinating social and economic life to the imperative of competing for investments and markets for their products.

For this purpose, the ruling class seeks to capitalize on the pandemic crisis to accelerate its shift toward dictatorship and intensify the levels of exploitation. However, the class tensions that erupted in the mass protests and strike waves last year across Latin America, most significantly in Chile, Ecuador and Bolivia, have only increased. The official response to the pandemic, spearheaded by the "return-to-work" campaign, will thus further escalate the class struggle.

Initial signs of this growing opposition among workers include wildcat strikes across maquiladoras along Mexico's border with the US, strikes by transportation workers in Peru, and constant protests by medical professionals across the entire region demanding proper protective equipment.

In a recent statement, the International Committee of the Fourth International explained: "All the actions required to stop the virus—the shutdown of nonessential production, quarantining, mass testing and contact tracing—run up against the profit interests of the ruling class. Ensuring support for all those impacted by these measures requires a massive redirection of social resources."

In other words, the only social force determined and capable of the necessary fight against the pandemic is the international working class, and this fight can be won only as part of a struggle against capitalism and for the transformation of the global economy on socialist foundations. This struggle requires the building of sections of the ICFI in every country across Latin America and the world.

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