Brazilian health care workers strike for PPE and risk bonus

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Unsafe working conditions created by the uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus pandemic are driving more and more workers into struggle in different regions of Brazil.

On Thursday, health professionals in Piauí, in Brazil's Northeast, started a statewide indefinite strike. They have denounced the fact that they have failed to receive a promised 40 percent risk bonus as well as the low quality of personal protective equipment (PPE) that they have been provided.

The strike broke out as the state reached a peak in the number of coronavirus cases. The Piauí Health Department last Thursday registered 18,000 confirmed cases. But another survey made by the department itself estimates that the actual number of infections in the state is more than 300,000. Less than a month ago, that figure was no more than 4,000.

Brazil as a whole registered nearly 1,300,000 confirmed coronavirus cases on Friday, while the death toll climbed to over 56,000. Once again, the country recorded the largest number of new cases—46,907—and new deaths—1,055—in the world. These figures are being reported by a consortium of news agencies collecting data from Brazilian states as the government of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro attempts to conceal the scale of the COVID-19 catastrophe.

With the increase in the number of patients, health professionals are even more exposed and overworked. Since the beginning of June, workers in Piauí have been protesting in hospitals in the capital and countryside to denounce their working conditions and claim their risk bonus.

Until now, the state government, led by Wellington Dias, of the Workers Party (PT), has failed to meet the workers' demands. Instead, the Piauí Court of Justice branded their movement "abusive" and prohibited the strike, under penalty of a daily fine of 10,000 reais (around $US1,825) against the Union of Nurses, Auxiliaries and Nursing Technicians (Senatepi).

In Rio de Janeiro, in the southeast, a strike by health professionals is imminent in the face of the state's deep coronavirus crisis. More than 3,000 workers are currently working with their salaries delayed, and some are already leaving work due to lack of money.

In a video recorded during a protest in front of the Alberto Torres State Hospital, one of the affected units, a worker said she is being threatened for denouncing the conditions confronting health care workers. "We have no salaries, no money for transportation. We are being threatened for showing our faces here. The hospital says it knows nothing, and we are left here with no respect. If the payment doesn't come out, no one will work."

According to data from the Ministry of Health, between March 1 and June 1, 83,000 of Brazil's approximately 2 million health professionals were infected with COVID-19. The country has one of the highest rates of contamination among health professionals. Worldwide, WHO estimates a total of 500,000 health professionals have been infected with coronavirus.

The fate of government "investments"

The mobilization of health workers takes place in the midst of a series of investigations into the embezzlement of public funds. This week, a businessman was arrested in Rio de Janeiro suspected of embezzling more than 9 million reais (around

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$US1.6 million) in public funds between 2012 and 2019. The embezzlement was supposedly carried out through a “Social Organization,” a type of private association that receives government subsidies. The case’s prosecutors claim they have evidence the businessman and his family used hospital money to pay for a sports vehicle and a luxury party.

This is just one of several corruption scandals within the health care system in Brazil. A report in *O Estado de Minas*, published on June 11, estimated that a total of roughly 1.5 billion reais (around $US270 million) in contracts are currently under investigation by the Federal and Civil Police and the Public Prosecutor’s Office over evidence of fraud in purchases and contracts connected to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The investigations point to overbilling in the purchase of ventilators and the construction of field hospitals. Besides Rio de Janeiro, there are contracts being investigated in São Paulo, Santa Catarina, Ceará, Amapá, Roraima, Pará, Maranhão, Acre and Rondônia. Taking advantage of the emergency nature of the pandemic, governments make contracts without going through a bureaucratic approval process, which further facilitates corruption.

The widespread character of these crimes demonstrates that the theft of public resources is systemic and that even the supposed “good deeds” of the ruling class, such as “investments” in health care, are exploited as an instrument for reaping illicit profits at the expense of human lives.

The fight against the pandemic necessarily becomes a fight against the state and the capitalist system itself. Health workers, who, since the beginning of the pandemic, have emerged as the front line in this struggle, are increasingly joining their class comrades in factories, meat processing plants, transportation and among broad sections of the population.

Their interests can only be achieved by means of an independent political mobilization of the Brazilian working class, unified with the global movement of workers facing these same conditions, and assuming a socialist and revolutionary direction.

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