Brazil’s coronavirus cases top 1.5 million amid record unemployment

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Brazil began the month of July surpassing the milestone of 60,000 deaths caused by COVID-19 and recording 1.5 million confirmed coronavirus cases. These terrible numbers, surpassed internationally only by the United States, are the result of a deliberate policy of opposing all public health measures to contain the spread of the deadly virus.

When Brazil registered its first cases of coronavirus cases in mid-March, fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro declared himself radically against the shutdown of economic activities. He said that it was impossible for workers to simultaneously maintain their health and their incomes. They would either face widespread infections or mass layoffs: death by the virus, or death by starvation.

Today, almost four months later, reality has proven that this supposed “choice” was fundamentally false. Brazilian working class homes are now being devastated simultaneously by disease and unemployment.

Last Tuesday, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) announced that, from March to May, some eight million workers lost their jobs in the country. For the first time since the institute started the survey in 2012, more than half of the working age population is unemployed.

This social catastrophe, however, is the responsibility of not only the sociopathic genius of Bolsonaro, but of all the political parties of the establishment, including the self-declared opposition headed by the Workers Party (PT). The initial disagreements over the official policy in response to the pandemic have vanished, giving way to a “united front” for the normal operation of economic activities under extremely unsafe conditions.

The series of statements made in March by Bolsonaro, minimizing COVID-19 as a “little flu”, and advocating a policy of herd immunity, stating that the pandemic was like a “rain” in which everyone should get wet, caused shock and anger in the Brazilian and international population. He emerged as the world leader with the most bluntly stated contempt for human life.

Riding a wave of middle-class “panelaços” (beating pans in protest) against the government, Bolsonaro’s bourgeois rivals tried to present themselves as politicians of an essentially different sort, reasonable and committed to life. The governor of São Paulo, João Doria, of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), declared on March 25 on social media: “Mr. President, in our state we have 40 deaths per COVID-19, out of a total of 46 in Brazil. These are persons who had an identity number, and relatives who will continue to miss them. They’re not fantasy deaths, Mr. President. And that’s not just a ‘small flu’”.

The governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel of the Christian Social Party (PSC), who, like Doria, was elected in 2018 as a local representative of Bolsonaro, declared on the same occasion: “We will be able to resurrect the economy. But it is impossible to resurrect those who have died.”

These right-wing politicians were openly praised by the PT and its allies. In a Twitter post, shared by Doria, the former PT president Luís Inácio “Lula” da Silva said: “We have to recognize that those who are doing the most serious work in this crisis are the governors and mayors.”

In São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, large field hospitals with thousands of beds were built to treat COVID-19 patients, and the Consortium of the Northeast, under the leadership of the PT governors and their allies, established a Scientific Committee to Fight Coronavirus. These policies covered up the fact that none of the states adopted serious measures to combat the virus, with massive testing and contact tracing. The only economic activities officially closed were retail, schools and leisure.

However, the auto industry, dragging the auto parts factories behind it along with other productive sectors, suspended their activities, declaring that it was because of expectations of “low market demand” as a result of the global economic crisis. This helped to create the false impression that a strict shutdown of the economy had been officially decreed.

Just like the local governments, the trade unions took advantage of these closures to pose as defenders of workers’ lives. After the automakers had already announced collective vacations, the ABC Metalworkers Union, one of the major unions in the country, printed on the cover of its newspaper: “Either the companies stop... or we stop the companies”.

But, independently of and in opposition to the unions, a wave of wildcat strikes and protests broke out in workplaces, denouncing the insufficiency of the measures adopted by the governments and corporations against the spread of the virus.

At the end of March, call center workers from all over Brazil stopped work against the unsafe operation of their companies in the midst of the pandemic, raising the slogan: “we are not going to die in our cubicles!” A group of operators who went on strike in Bahia confronted the PT Governor Rui Costa, who presides over the Consortium of the Northeast declaring: “Your quarantine is selective. We have to die because we are poor, we have to stay in that company in Boa Viagem (neighborhood) and bring disease to our families. There are already infected people inside. This is going to be a tragedy foretold.”

In the same week, in Santa Catarina, hundreds of workers in a meat processing plant, owned by JBS, engaged in a spontaneous strike

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against unsafe working conditions and were brutally repressed by military police as they protested in front of the plant.

Meanwhile, the bourgeois parties dropped their differences to jointly articulate the fundamental policy of guaranteeing capitalist interests in the face of the economic crisis deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between late March and early April, they approved the transfer of huge sums of money to the corporate and financial elite. Congress unanimously approved a corporate rescue package of 700 billion reais (about $140 billion)—less than 15 percent of which was destined for 600 reais in emergency aid to workers who lost their sources of income. It likewise passed the so-called "war budget" amendment, which freed the government from its fiscal targets and allowed the Central Bank to buy junk bonds for the first time in history.

In early April, the Bolsonaro administration created, through a provisional measure, conditions for corporations to suspend labor contracts and cut workers' wages by as much as 70 percent. These measures were immediately embraced by the unions, which, defending them as the only way to save jobs, signed agreements of this nature on a wide scale, affecting nearly 12 million workers.

With the problems confronting capitalist accumulation having received rapid and forceful responses, the coronavirus was spreading at an increasing speed amidst government neglect. According to *Worldometers*, between the beginning and end of April, the weekly average of new cases jumped from less than 600 cases per day to more than 5,000. The death toll in the same period rose from around 250 to almost 6,000.

A series of strikes and protests by health care workers erupted across the country, denouncing a much more serious situation in the hospitals than was being reported, with a lack of adequate personal protective equipment for workers and no structure for patients. "Unfortunately, the public system in Belém has already collapsed," declared a doctor, weeks before the mayor acknowledged the collapse of the health and funeral system in the city, which is the capital of the northeastern state of Pará.

In the first days of May, Brazil broke the 100,000 mark of confirmed coronavirus cases, and several capitals announced the overcrowding of their hospitals. Researchers estimated, pointing to the underreporting of cases, a real number of about 2 million infections already by that time. Some states, such as Pará and Ceará, have decreed lockdowns, although under very loose terms.

However, a change of perspective was taking shape within the international bourgeoisie. All over the world, the ruling elites adopted a new policy—canonized in Donald Trump's slogan, "the cure cannot be worse than the disease"—of suspending all measures to contain the virus and prematurely reopening the economy.

The Brazilian ruling class unified around the genocidal campaign led by Bolsonaro of a "war on lockdowns". The sociopathic and obscurantist president emerged as a consistent representative of the interests of the entire capitalist class.

Heads of dozens of Brazilian industrial and commercial associations marched alongside Bolsonaro to the Supreme Court to say that the measures to contain the pandemic had already gone too far. The businessmen declared their concern that the worldwide resumption of economic operations, especially in Asia, would threaten the competitiveness of Brazilian capitalism. They stated that conditions were ripe for the resumption of production in the country.

The criminal demands of the ruling class were not confronted by any local government; on the contrary. Instead of constraining the resumption of production, governors and mayors threw off the restrictions and went on to reopen all activities. In São Paulo, the state most affected by the pandemic, Doria retreated from an already presented lockdown proposal and instead announced plans to reopen commerce.

The consequences of this policy were expressed in a sudden rise of the Brazilian Stock Market, which recorded its best May since 2009.

The trade unions played a central role in this process. Since April, they have promoted a campaign for the recovery of Brazil's industry in the midst of the pandemic, as an issue of national "strategic interest". Voicing the most reactionary interests of the Brazilian ruling class, the presidents of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) and Força Sindical, the country's largest trade union federations, wrote a joint article attacking Brazil's dependence on products manufactured in China.

As soon as the corporations decided to resume their operations, these same unions helped to force workers back into their deadly workplaces, affirming that the companies had established absolutely safe protocols.

The general resumption of work and the reopening of trade led to explosions of cases in large companies, infecting hundreds or thousands of workers at once. Outbreaks of COVID-19 in meat processing plants led to the contamination of entire cities as well as of the largest indigenous reserve in Brazil, threatening the extinction of native peoples.

Touching words in defense of life were spoken by bourgeois politicians when the country had not reached 50 deaths by COVID-19. Today, Doria and Witzel are silent in the face of more than 15,000 deaths recorded in São Paulo and 10,000 in Rio de Janeiro. The third state with the highest number of deaths is Ceará, governed by Camilo Santana of the PT, with more than 6,000 confirmed COVID deaths.

The bourgeois state has failed to contain the spread of COVID-19 on all fronts. All of the meat processing units closed by the Public Ministry of Labor (MPT) around the country were reopened days or weeks later, causing new outbreaks of the virus. Recently, an infected plant continued to operate for a week after its closure was ordered by the MPT, and in fact only suspended operations after the workers took action.

The only social force defending human life intransigently is the working class, through its strikes and protests. Only the expansion of this movement can prevent the coronavirus from causing hundreds of thousands more unnecessary and avoidable deaths. All social sectors committed to the progress of humanity, including scientists and researchers, must turn to the working class and help it establish its control over the economy and society.

But the essential task for the achievement of this perspective is the independent political mobilization of the international working class, unified around a program of socialist policies that confront the interests of individual profit that govern society today. It is necessary to build revolutionary parties, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), as the leadership of the workers' movement in Brazil and every country.

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