US-led “back to work” drive spreads death across Latin America

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On Monday, Latin America’s official coronavirus death toll reached a grim milestone, surpassing the total dead in North America. More than 145,000 have died, and over 3.5 million have tested positive across Latin America. Mass poverty and inequality dominate the region after hundreds of years of colonial and imperialist exploitation, leaving each country especially vulnerable to the transmission of the virus.

Four of the seven countries with the highest global positive cases are now in Latin America, as underfunded public health systems collapse.

Brazil is second with 1.9 million cases, behind only the US. Peru, Chile and Mexico are fourth, fifth and sixth, respectively, with over 300,000 positive cases each. These figures drastically underestimate the spread of the virus because testing is in shambles. While Italy and the US presently have performed more than 100 tests per 1,000 people, Mexico has tested just 5 people per 1,000, Brazil 7 per 1,000 and Peru 9 per 1,000.

As hospitals overflow and as cities dig up bodies to clear cemetery space for the dead, all governments and all political parties across the region are scrambling to reopen their economies, sacrificing countless lives for corporate profit.

In Brazil, where President Jair Bolsonaro responded to the death toll by proclaiming, “So what?,” businesses have begun reopening across the country and millions of workers are being forced back on the job. “Governors and mayors are sending the population to the slaughterhouse with the prerogative of an economic recovery,” a Brazilian medical expert told CNN.

In Mexico, where auto plants and sweatshop maquiladoras that produce parts for export to the US have restarted, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador told the population to go to work, “be free,” and “enjoy the sky, the sun and fresh air.” The ostensibly left-wing López Obrador has mimicked Bolsonaro’s policies, announcing the further lifting of restrictions this week. Earlier, he told Mexicans they could stave off the virus by eating corn, which he calls “that blessed plant.”

In Nicaragua, the government led by Sandinista Daniel Ortega has effectively denied the existence of the virus, while in Honduras, US-backed President Juan Orlando Hernandez tested positive and, like Bolsonaro, used his own sickness to downplay the virus, forcing the country’s maquiladoras to stay open. Honduran workers are dying by the hundreds to produce clothes and shoes for export to the US.

Ligia Ramos, a director of the Honduran Medical College tweeted:

“If we don’t close the maquiladoras, we will have to close the hospitals. It does not make sense to be crying every week for a friend, a coworker. Close the damn maquiladoras for the love of God. If they continue with the maquiladoras, if they keep making money on the pain of the people, we will not stop the disease.”

In neighboring Guatemala and El Salvador, the virus has also spread through deportees from the US, many of whom US officials knew had tested positive.

From Tijuana to Cape Horn, the virus is ravaging impoverished regions from indigenous tribes in the Amazon rainforest to densely populated urban megacities like Mexico City, Lima and Rio de Janeiro.

But as the virus spreads, the ruling classes of Latin America are forcing millions back to work on behalf of US imperialism, which requires the reopening of Latin American supply chains to fuel its own “back-to-work” campaign.

In March, most of Latin America was only just beginning to experience widespread community transmission of the disease. Mexico and Honduras did not suffer their first reported coronavirus deaths until March 26, while Brazil’s came on March 19 and Chile’s on March 21. Peru’s first reported death came on April 1.

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Production, largely for export to the US, continued throughout the region at this time.

In April, however, as the death tolls began to climb, workers' strikes and protests spread through the region, especially in Mexico and Brazil. In mid-April, as workers denounced unsafe conditions in northern Mexico's maquiladoras, Trump announced: "I spoke with the president of Mexico yesterday. … If a supply chain based in Mexico or Canada interrupts with our making a big product and an important product, or even a military product, we're not going to be happy, let me tell you that."

As a result, across the Americas, the death toll rose and production continued. The markets recovered thanks to the resumption of production, the multitrillion-dollar CARES Act corporate bailout and the promise of endless cash infusions from the Federal Reserve.

Now, the back-to-work initiative is in full swing in the US and widespread outbreaks have transformed North American workplaces into death traps, including auto plants, meatpacking facilities, produce farms and warehouses. As US workers are forced back to work, Wall Street is demanding that Latin America further speed up production.

This was the purpose of Trump's visit with Mexican President López Obrador in Washington last week, where business executives from both countries insisted on an end to whatever work restrictions remain. Speaking to the Atlantic Council after the dinner, US Ambassador to Mexico Christopher Landau said, "I was talking to one of the senior executives from the Ford Motor Company" about further speeding up production in Mexico. "They were saying they are going to have to start shutting down their factories in the United States as of next week if they don't get that rolling."

At companies like Ford, GM and Fiat-Chrysler, international supply chains link Bolivian and Chilean mines, Central American and Mexican parts production and the assembly plants in the US, Argentina, Brazil and Canada. These companies have profited immensely on the back-to-work campaigns in each country.

Over the course of the hemispheric back-to-work drive, Ford's stock rose from $4.01 per share on March 23 to $6.30 today, a 57 percent increase. GM's rose from $16.80 on March 18 to $25.32, a 51 percent increase. Fiat Chrysler's stock sold at $6.35 on March 20, rising to $10.23 today, an increase of 61 percent.

Meanwhile, the UN reports that in just four months, the number of Latin Americans in need of emergency food assistance has tripled. The World Bank reports that 50 million people will fall into poverty in Latin America this year, bringing the total to 230 million.

Extreme poverty will triple from 4.5 percent to 15.5 percent as a result of the virus, rising to a total of 96 million people, including millions who lack clean water for hand washing.

In the densely populated working-class neighborhoods of Lima, Peru, where the virus is spreading rapidly, average working hours have fallen by 80 percent, forcing masses of workers into destitution. There will be 44 million unemployed across the region this year. There are widespread reports of rising prostitution.

But here, too, there is more good news for corporate America and the geostrategic interests of US imperialism.

Mass unemployment and sickness will create such a downward pressure on wages that, as S&P Global reported this month, "If anything, an economic crisis in Latin America twinned with depreciating currencies and reduced relative labor costs may lead manufacturers to expand in Latin America rather than head to Asia." Not only will this improve corporate America's bottom line, it will also help US imperialism sideline its geostrategic rival, China.

Common action is required on the part of workers across the Americas to unite in the fight for workplace safety and against the US-led back-to-work drive. It is a matter of life and death for millions of people.

Everywhere there is a yearning for a radical transformation of the world economy—this was shown by the mass protests that swept the region in 2019. But what is needed is a socialist political perspective. We urge readers across Latin America to contact the International Committee of the Fourth International today.

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