

Mexican medical workers, facing highest death toll in the world, protest layoffs and lack of protective gear

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8 September 2020

Amnesty International reported last week that Mexico has the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths among medical personnel of any country in the world. As of September 4, a total of 1,410 health care workers have died from the virus and 104,590 have tested positive. These figures are a damning indictment of the criminal response to the pandemic by the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The United States, Britain, and Brazil follow in the list of COVID-19 fatalities among medical workers, with 1,077, 649 and 634, respectively.

In Mexico, the health care sector constitutes about 2 percent of the total COVID-19 deaths and 17 percent of the cases, demonstrating in part a massive gap in testing for COVID-19 between medical professionals and the population in general. The government claims, however, to have tested only 283,000 medical workers, or one-third of the total, throughout the pandemic.

Numerous strikes, roadblocks and protests among nurses, doctors and other staff at hospitals have taken place since March, demanding above all personal protective equipment. The response by officials, as demonstrated by the appalling numbers of dead and infected, has been wholly inadequate.

Hospital administrators have been recorded telling workers that there is simply no equipment available, while the federal government has expressly dismissed their demands claiming that public medical workers who took leave got infected at similar rates. Many, however, kept working in the private sector, where they have also become infected in high numbers.

During a press conference last Thursday, José Luis Alomía, general director of epidemiology, had no response to the Amnesty International report, claiming that the government has taken all necessary measures to

protect health care workers and adding evasively, “The comparison between countries on this matter is not viable since each one has its own model.”

Amid generalized outrage, the government has instead turned to firing workers who express opposition. In one of the numerous reports of firings, *Expansión* reported the case of Cristian Javier Erosa, who delivered food at a hospital in Quintana Roo. He was fired after “I demanded a written order that I had to enter the COVID area because they were not providing me with adequate protective gear.”

The trade unions have not only refused to wage any struggle to protect the lives of medical workers, but played a crucial role in the suppression of discontent.

A doctor in Mexico City wrote on September 5 that, “At the General Hospital in Mexico, the union encouraged [personnel on leave] not to come back throughout August, and did nothing to provide protective equipment or to replace temporarily the personnel on leave.”

Several groups with thousands of Mexican health care workers have been formed on social media to organize outside of the corrupt union bureaucracy. One of them, United Health Care Workers (UNTS), led a protest on September 1 in Mexico City that involved hundreds of employees from hospitals, along with workers from the Metro, the state company Liconsa, the Fire Department and the Mail Office.

At the demonstration, Rafael Soto Cruz, a nurse and spokesperson for the UNTS, exposed that he was fired for demanding PPE on the pretext that he “usurped the trade union’s functions.” He denounced trade union officials for “identifying the union dissidents and beginning to harass them, sanction them and fire them,” as cited by Infobae.

The UNTS released a statement on September 5

declaring, “Those unions that should have spoken out to defend workers did the abominable job of hiding the dead, silencing the voices making denunciations; there is no one more responsible than these parasites for being first in deaths globally.”

While being denied proper protective equipment, medical workers are faced with the overwhelming of hospitals by the raging pandemic. The World Health Organization warned Mexico specifically on July 10 that its reopening would “accelerate infections and possibly collapse the health care systems,” COVID-19 deaths have doubled since, to over 68,000.

Nonetheless, the López Obrador government continued its murderous reopening of factories in major but nonessential sectors such as auto, auto parts and electronics, caving to pressure by the Trump administration and North American transnationals. The other factor exacerbating the pandemic is the refusal by the ruling class to provide any aid to those laid off and those who depend upon the informal sector for their income.

This has forced a majority of Mexico’s impoverished workforce, which depends on informal street sales and services, to risk infection to earn a living. Within Mexico City, the three municipalities with greatest infections have among the highest numbers of people living in poverty. While outside of Mexico City, the next five states with the highest COVID-19 cases have higher informality rates than the national average, from 54 percent in Guanajuato to 71 percent in Puebla.

Meanwhile, *Forbes Mexico* reported last month that the country has 33 oligarchs with fortunes of more than \$500 million. Last year, there were 3,790 people in Mexico with more than \$30 million in net worth, among 8,040 in total across Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the Wealth X report.

Even more wealth, which is all generated by the working class, has ended in the coffers of the financial oligarchies in the United States and Europe through the imperialist exploitation of the country’s cheap labor and natural resources.

Experts have made clear that containing the pandemic requires shutting down non-essential sectors, providing income for those suspended or laid off, appropriate staffing and protective equipment for medical and other essential workers, and expanding tests and contact tracing.

The response by the López Obrador government, however, has been driven not by an interest to protect the population, but by the capitalist imperatives of resuming

the stream of profits for corporations and not impinging on the wealth of the super-rich.

It has slashed ministerial operating budgets by 75 percent during the pandemic, even affecting health care. The Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), which manages most hospitals and clinics, has seen its expenditures fall 22 percent during the first six months of this year compared to 2019.

This has involved layoffs of doctors during the pandemic. On August 31, 50 doctors at rural hospitals in Chiapas were informed that they had been fired by the state government controlled by AMLO’s Morena party.

Any “wealth surcharge” in Latin America, wrote the *Financial Times* recently, would result in “capital flight” by foreign investors. Viridiana Ríos of the Wilson Center indicated to the newspaper that, regarding Mexico, “discussion has been stifled by the leftist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. ... The political elites came to power under the umbrella of the economic elites and as a result have not been able to charge them enough tax.”

At his morning press conference Last Wednesday, López Obrador again rejected any increase in taxes on the wealthy in response to the crisis.

As in every other country, the response of the government to the pandemic has underscored the incompatibility between capitalism and the social needs of the working class, including free and quality health care.

The Morena administration’s indifference to the massive COVID-19 death toll among medical and other workers demonstrates that the only progressive response to the pandemic is the overthrow of capitalism and the taking of power by the working class to reorganize society on a socialist basis in Mexico and internationally.



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