

Brazil's COVID-19 deaths pass 150,000 mark amid back-to-school campaign

Eduardo Parati and Gabriel Lemos**16 October 2020**

Last Saturday, Brazil's recorded COVID-19 deaths passed the 150,000 mark, seven months after the beginning of the pandemic in the country. The grim milestone was announced by the press consortium created in June by the largest Brazilian newspapers after the government of Brazil's fascist President Jair Bolsonaro tried to censor data related to the pandemic as part of his government's homicidal effort to reopen the economy.

Brazil has now also recorded more than 5 million cases, ranking third in the world in number of coronavirus cases behind the US and India, and second in number of deaths, trailing only the US. The country also ranks third in deaths per million inhabitants, behind Peru and Belgium. However, four of Brazil's 27 states have a higher mortality rate than Peru, with more than a thousand deaths per million people.

Although in recent weeks Brazil has registered a drop in the number of cases and deaths after months on a plateau of more than a thousand deaths daily, the pandemic is still out of control in the country. Commenting on the Brazilian numbers on Monday, Michael Ryan, emergencies director at the World Health Organization, warned that the trend of fewer cases is occurring with "very, very high" numbers. Pointing to what is happening in Europe, he also warned: "the fact that the pandemic is in decline does not mean that it will not get worse again."

Showing his usual contempt for people's lives, Bolsonaro said on Wednesday that the pandemic had been "exaggerated," while he again attacked the limited isolation measures implemented by governors, which are now being withdrawn.

In reality, the numbers of cases and deaths are grossly underestimated. Brazil has been one of the countries with the least testing in the world throughout the pandemic, with a test rate of less than one per thousand inhabitants, little more than Libya, a country devastated by a decade of war. Projections show that if isolation measures are abandoned, the country would have 3 million more people infected in 30 days. An estimate by the Health Intelligence Laboratory of the University of São Paulo's School of Medicine also showed that Brazil's real number of cases is over 18 million, and COVID-19 deaths, over 200,000.

Bolsonaro's dismissive response to the pandemic has been accompanied by a frenetic promotion of hydroxychloroquine, for which there exists no scientific proof of effectiveness against COVID-19. Last Saturday, when he walked without a mask around a city on the coast of São Paulo, causing people to gather, he repeated the claim that "around 30 percent of deaths could be

avoided with the use of hydroxychloroquine in the initial phase."

The promotion of hydroxychloroquine has been combined with an appeal to the more backward and confused elements that are part of his fascistic social base, particularly among Brazil's Christian fundamentalists. At the end of a speech in the state of Pernambuco on October 1, Bolsonaro made reference to the drug as a "blessing from God," which "appeared" to "solve our problems." He ended his speech with "God, homeland and family," a slogan historically associated with Integralism, a Brazilian nationalist movement inspired by Italian fascism that emerged in the 1930s. The motto was also used by the president in founding his new fascist party, Alliance for Brazil.

Two health ministers were dismissed by Bolsonaro in April and May for refusing to recommend the use of hydroxychloroquine. In May, then-interim Health Minister Gen. Eduardo Pazuello recommended in a ministry protocol the use of hydroxychloroquine, together with the antibiotic azithromycin, in all adult COVID-19 cases. After Pazuello was finally sworn in on September 15, the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* reported that the Health Ministry was discussing the distribution of a "COVID-19 kit" through the Popular Pharmacy program. Besides hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, the kit would contain the fermifuge ivermectin, which also has no proven effectiveness against COVID-19.

At Pazuello's inauguration, Bolsonaro again advocated the reopening of schools. "We had no reason to close the schools, but the restrictive measures...were in the hands of the governors and mayors," he said. "We are the country with the most days of lockdown in schools, that's absurd." In the last month, however, governors and mayors have followed the president's murderous directives and driven the reopening of private and public schools throughout the country.

So far, eight of Brazil's 27 states have either completely or partially reopened public schools. By the end of the month, three more states will have followed suit. Amazonas, the first state to reopen public schools, on August 10, recorded 3,300 cases and five deaths among educators by the end of September. The newspaper *Radar Amazônico* reported on October 13 that some schools with positive tests were not closed, with teachers and staff forced to continue working even when infected.

In the state capital, Manaus, which witnessed horrific scenes of overcrowded hospitals and hundreds of mass graves being dug at the beginning of the year, 30 percent of high schools were closed

after a week of classes due to new outbreaks. Throughout the state of Amazonas, the number of cases and deaths has again increased in recent weeks after 110,000 public elementary school students returned to classrooms. This new outbreak is occurring after studies were published claiming that Manaus had supposedly achieved herd immunity.

Private school classes have already resumed in 16 Brazilian states. Among them are those governed by the Workers' Party (PT)-Ceará, with more than a thousand deaths per million inhabitants and the only state in the country with rising cases, and Rio Grande do Norte. Private schools also reopened on August 3 in Maranhão, where the state government is controlled by the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB). Dozens have been temporarily closed again after students and teachers contracted the new coronavirus.

In the country's most populous state, São Paulo, private and public schools partially reopened on October 7. São Paulo has recorded more than 37,000 deaths and 1 million cases of COVID-19, the highest numbers for any single state in the world. At the same time, the right-wing governor, João Doria of the Brazilian Social-Democratic Party (PSDB), announced last Friday that only one of the 17 regions of the state remained in the "orange" phase, the second most severe, while all of the other regions were in "flexibilization" (yellow) or "partial opening" (green) phases. After restaurants, bars, beauty salons and gyms were reopened with restrictions, last week was the turn for cinemas and theaters.

This will surely pave the way for mayors to carry out the reopening of schools and for the state government to increase the maximum percentage of students in schools. Today, classrooms are limited to a maximum of 35 percent of students, a number that could double as more regions of the state move into the "green" phase. São Paulo has about 13.3 million students in basic education and 1 million teachers and school staff, a combined total equal to 32 percent of the state's population. Considering the latest serological survey revealing that 20 percent of the population contracted the deadly virus in the region hardest hit by the pandemic in São Paulo, these numbers point to the catastrophic consequences of reopening schools in the state.

In opposition to the campaigns of state governors throughout Brazil to reopen schools, the vast majority of the population believes they should remain closed. A September 27 opinion poll by *Datafolha* showed that 75 percent of voters in the state of São Paulo were against reopening schools in the next two months, a number that increases to 79 percent in a country-wide poll.

Under these conditions, the APEOESP, the São Paulo teachers' union, pretends to oppose the government campaign by calling a "health strike against the return [of teachers and students] to schools." Besides the fact that the return has already begun, the APEOESP's history of betrayals and latest actions to deflect opposition to the reopening demonstrate the fraudulent nature of this call.

Since June, the APEOESP has organized motorcades to supposedly "pressure" the government to hold meetings with the union and the "opposition" in the state legislature, where APEOESP President Maria Isabel Noronha, known as Bebel, is a

state representative for the PT. In one of the meetings held with São Paulo's secretary of education, Rossieli Soares, the union criticized the secretary for not discussing the formation of a parity commission with the APEOESP "to debate the moment of return to in-person classes and preparations for a safe return."

The APEOESP has advocated that "there should only be a return to in-person classes with a drastic reduction of the pandemic and a guarantee of health safety," not after the pandemic is eradicated. Considering the precarious infrastructure of schools and the insufficient adoption of hygiene protocols to contain the pandemic, in practice, this means letting the virus spread freely.

At the national level, the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), affiliated to the PT-controlled Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), has adopted the same policy as the APEOESP and other state unions, repeating that hygiene protocols would guarantee a safe return to schools.

What the APEOESP and CNTE fear most is an independent movement of teachers from below, which has already begun in an isolated form in states that have reopened schools. Teachers have passed through bitter experiences with the unions isolating and diverting the struggle against the attacks by state governments. Last year and earlier this year, a number of governors, including those controlled by the PT and the PCdoB, approved state pension reforms, with the CNTE refusing to call for a unified and coordinated struggle against these attacks. Now, with the PT and PCdoB governors themselves reopening schools, teachers must put no trust in the unions, which are controlled by these parties.

Brazilian teachers must break with unions, which are linked to the capitalist state. At a time of intensifying global class struggle against the reopening of schools in the midst of the deadly pandemic, which includes the student strike in Poland and the occupation of 700 Greek schools in recent weeks, Brazilian teachers should form rank-and-file committees independent of unions and the parties that they support and unify their struggles with those of the working class and youth throughout Brazil and internationally.



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