

“The pandemic is not over yet”

Brazilian nurse speaks out against closure of COVID hospital and firing of 300 employees

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The government of Para, a state in the north of Brazil, announced last week the closure of two centers for the treatment of COVID-19. Both the Castelo dos Sonhos Hospital and the Castanhal Regional Hospital had just been opened between June and July, and now have suddenly shut down.

The approximately 300 workers at the Castanhal Regional Hospital carried out a protest last Thursday just after receiving the news that they were all fired by the company contracted to manage the unit. They demanded their jobs back and the payment of two months of overdue salaries.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Gleyce Cristina, one of the nurses who led Thursday’s protest, which was organized independently by the workers. A picture of Gleyce holding up a placard reading “yesterday we were heroes, today we were fired” was shared hundreds of times on social media.

Gleyce told the WSWS that she and her colleagues were hired in June, about a month after the state government acknowledged the total collapse of Para’s health care system. Castanhal, a city of about 200,000 inhabitants in the northeast of the state, was one of the focal points of that collapse.

“The [Castanhal Regional Hospital] has been under construction for over 10 years,” Gleyce said. “Only after many people insisted, after many died, they inaugurated the fourth floor for COVID.

“As soon as it opened the situation was very critical. They gave a time period until December for the operation of the unit as a COVID center. We are in October and it is already being closed. But the pandemic is not over yet.”

She warned of the still alarming situation of the

COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, which already has more than 5.2 million confirmed cases and more than 150,000 deaths. About 500 Brazilians continue to die every day from the disease.

“While the hospital was open, people kept coming,” she said. “There were always patients. There was a patient there that said that the disease had just arrived in her city.”

The Secretary of Health of Belém (Sesma), has published recent data that points to a terrifying growth in the number of suspected COVID-19 cases in the state capital. Between October 12 and 16, hospitals registered a 112 percent increase in cases of acute respiratory syndrome.

But Gleyce’s stance toward the pandemic is radically opposed to that of the government of Para, led by Helder Barbalho of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB). Explaining the reasons for the closure of the hospitals, the state health secretary Romulo Gomes declared: “We take into consideration the yellow flag zone in which these units are located.”

This measure is part of the irresponsible and homicidal policy of the Para government and the entire Brazilian ruling class. Barbalho has since September authorized the reopening of schools in Para and is now trying to force the return of in-person classes in state public schools, facing resistance from educators. Gleyce firmly opposes the reopening of schools: “Not even we in the health sector have vaccines, it is too early to do so.”

There is another factor behind the closure of the health care units. The government of Barbalho is under federal investigation for the diversion of health care resources, which intensified during the COVID-19

pandemic. This directly involves the contracting of so-called social organizations to manage public hospitals, like the one in Castanhal.

As it launched a Federal Police operation on Tuesday, the Federal Public Ministry stated: “Helder Barbalho would previously deal with businessmen and the then chief of staff on matters related to the bidding procedures, that have been supposedly ... defrauded and over-billed.”

Gleyce said that she and her colleagues were hired with the guarantee that their jobs would be maintained even after the COVID-19 operation, as the hospital began functioning as an oncology and trauma center. “Many friends have given up years of work on other jobs. There are desperate family men.

“It was only after the media started talking about the hospital closure that they sat down to talk to us and informed us that we were fired. Without warning, without anything. Our pay has ended on the 15th, and we have two months of overdue salaries.

“We want our jobs, they said we wouldn’t have to leave. It’s a total disregard for life. I have friends who left their jobs and are sick at home. The last ones were a cleaning lady and a nurse, who on his last day on duty found out that he had COVID.

“And now, how will they take care of themselves, without money? And where will they take care of themselves, if the hospital is closed? It wasn’t supposed to close, COVID isn’t over, nor did a vaccine arrive.”

But the attacks faced by health professionals in Para, Gleyce declared, are not an isolated episode: “What is happening to me and my friends is what happens to many. We fought, we gave our blood, risked our lives. Many times bringing the virus into our home. They called us front-line heroes, but when it came time to fire us, they didn’t have a shred of pity.”

These workers will be thrown into the growing ranks of the unemployed in Brazil, which reached historic records during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 10 million workers have lost their jobs in the country and, for the first time in decades, more than half the working age population is unemployed.

Gleyce said: “Unfortunately, we have no one to fight for us. We have no representative, it’s just our own voice. We wanted a response from the government, that it would guarantee our employment, but it doesn’t

respond. The newspapers promised to help, but there was no answer.”

Referring to the Regional Nursing Council (Coren), which claims to represent the nurses’ interests, Gleyce said: “I haven’t even heard from Coren yet. I’m sure they know about what happened with us, because it had great repercussions, but even Coren is not in our favor. All I know is that you have to pay them every year, but Coren is good for nothing.”

On the other hand, Gleyce reported that, “in terms of shares on social media, we had many responses.” According to her, most of the support comes from workers who are going through the same situation.

She responded enthusiastically upon learning about the growing number of strikes and demonstrations by health professionals around the world, like those that swept Chile and Argentina less than a month ago. And she agreed with the perspective advocated by the WSW, that workers form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to represent themselves and coordinate their struggles internationally.

Gleyce concluded the interview with a message to all workers: “We are discussing how to continue this struggle. It’s not going to end like this; we’re fighting for our rights.”



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