

Brazilian state of Amapá on brink of social explosion after 18-day blackout

Tomas Castanheira
20 November 2020

The state of Amapá, located in northern Brazil, has for the last 18 days faced a situation of widespread chaos caused by the collapse of its power system. With about 90 percent of its population, almost 800,000 people, subjected to a lack of electricity, water and other basic services, the state is on the brink of a social explosion.

The crisis began on November 3 after an explosion followed by a fire in the state's main energy substation, located in the capital city of Macapá. The facility is managed by the Spanish-based transnational Isolux Corsán. The collapse of the substation caused a blackout in 13 of the state's 16 municipalities. Five days passed before the energy supply was partially restored.

On November 9, the Ministry of Mines and Energy of President Jair Bolsonaro's administration, which established a crisis committee to deal with the situation, announced: "The people of Amapá have electricity again." The government claimed to have reconnected Amapá to the National Interconnected Energy System, and to have restored "70 percent of the state's service." A rotation system, with power supplied at six-hour intervals, was nominally established.

The population, however, contradicts the government's claims. One resident reported to *Brasil de Fato* a week ago: "They are sharing a lie about our state. It has not been normalized, it is chaos. We have [energy] rationing only at some points. In practically 13 municipalities there is no water or light." On Tuesday, November 17, the state was plunged into a new total blackout.

The lack of energy has led to a shortage of water in a state that borders a large section of the Amazon River, the largest in the world, as well as of food and other basic products. Long lines were formed at gas stations,

supermarkets and ATMs, as credit card systems went offline. Internet and telephone networks have been disrupted and signals remain very unstable.

Macapá, which accounts for more than half of the state's population, was already experiencing a rapid rise in COVID-19 cases, having registered a 74 percent increase in hospitalizations between October 19 and 26. The chaotic situation provoked by the lack of energy has affected COVID-19 treatment centers, forcing transfers of patients and interruption of testing.

Hospitals also began to register an increase in hospitalizations of children with diarrhea and vomiting as a result of difficulties in accessing clean drinking water. Residents of the capital reported collecting rainwater for drinking and domestic activities. In the Archipelago of Bailique, a district of Macapá, where the Amazon River meets the sea, people are reportedly drinking and bathing in salt water.

In a video being shared on social media, an elderly woman resident of the Fazendinha district declared: "What is happening to the people here in Macapá is absurd. Many children are getting sick because of the heat. I have two grandchildren who are sick. Those who have the conditions can pay for a generator, but we are poor. The food is now very expensive. People who are poor are eating eggs, which are cheaper, sausage, mortadella. This is not adequate food for a child. Authorities are not paying attention to the poor. A lot of people are suffering. A lot of appliances, like refrigerators, are burning out [because of power oscillations]. A week ago someone came to offer me a day of domestic services, because his family was going hungry."

The deep indignation felt by the working population led to a wave of protests throughout the state. In different neighborhoods, residents erected barricades

with burning tires and mattresses, and a series of marches took place in the streets of Macapá. By Tuesday, the 15th day of the blackout, the Military Police had already recorded 110 different demonstrations.

The government of Governor Waldez Góes of the Democratic Labor Party (PDT), part of the self-proclaimed “left” opposition to Bolsonaro, responded to the demonstrations with brutal repression. A police attack on a protest in the impoverished neighborhood of Congós left at least four wounded, among them a 13-year-old who was shot with a rubber bullet in the eye and risks losing his sight.

On Tuesday, Governor Góes issued a decree, using the pandemic as a pretext, prohibiting protests. It states he had prohibited “until the date of December 2, 2020, throughout the territory of the state of Amapá ... any kind of political activity of people in streets, squares, gyms, in public or private environments, even outdoors, which can lead to crowds of people, such as meetings, walks, motorcades, rallies, flag walks, etc.”

The energy crisis and the popular uprising had a direct impact on the ongoing municipal elections. A controversial decision by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), at the request of the Regional Electoral Court (TRE) of Amapá, ordered the postponement of the elections exclusively in the capital. They were originally scheduled for last Sunday, and were rescheduled for December 13 and 27.

The decision was made a few hours after the release of a poll showing a vertiginous drop in voting intentions for the first-place candidate, Josiel Alcolumbre of the Democrats (DEM). Josiel is brother of Senate President Davi Alcolumbre, also of the DEM, and is supported by the current mayor of Macapá and the governor of the state. His poll numbers fell from 35 percent to 26 percent, in proportion to the growth of those rejecting his candidacy, which rose from 27 percent to 36 percent.

On Thursday, the Federal Court ordered the removal for a month of the board of the National Electrical Energy Agency (Aneel) and the National Electric System Operator (ONS), allegedly to prevent them from interfering with investigations into the causes of the blackout.

The judge in the case, João Bosco Costa Soares, declared: “I understand that more diligence was needed

on the part of Aneel and ONS, especially regarding the charging of the contracted company for repairs on the first transformer that had been under maintenance since December 2019.” Bosco also stated that the blackout was “caused by a succession of ‘Federal Governments’ that neglected to properly plan public policies for the production, transmission and distribution of electricity.”

The consequences of this foretold disaster, which benefited companies such as Isolux Corsán, are now being inflicted upon the population of Amapá and the entire Brazilian working class. Through a provisional measure, the Bolsonaro administration will distribute the costs of the emergency actions taken in Amapá in the light bills of all Brazilians; that is, they will be literally paid for by the workers themselves.

Contrary to all claims by the federal and state governments that the crisis is already under control, this week’s blackout made clear that the situation is as far from over as is the popular discontent.

That this energy crisis is occurring simultaneously with the COVID-19 pandemic is no mere coincidence. Both are rooted in the deep crisis of the capitalist system and its inability to meet essential social needs. The defense of the most basic conditions of human existence depends upon the establishment of socialist governments of the working class in Brazil and throughout the world.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact