

Brazilian government intensifies herd immunity campaign amid new COVID-19 surge

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The number of new COVID-19 infections and deaths is surging amid municipal elections throughout Brazil and an ongoing campaign to reopen schools and workplaces.

The pandemic is accelerating once again in the country, with a 29 percent increase in the weekly average of deaths from two weeks ago, reaching a daily average of roughly 500 deaths. In the past few days the number of daily deaths has steadily climbed toward 700.

With the exception of Paraná, all states in the southeast and south, where more than half the population lives, recorded an upsurge in the moving average of deaths, with an increase of 132 percent in Rio de Janeiro, 93 percent in Minas Gerais, and 39 percent in São Paulo. The Amazon, where the Electoral Court of the state ruled that infected people could go to the polls in the first round, recorded a 32 percent increase in the moving average of daily deaths.

States in all regions of the country recorded an increase or stability in the moving average. In Ceará, ruled by Camilo Santana of the Workers Party (PT), the moving average increased by 74 percent.

Despite references to the beginning of a second wave in Brazil, in reality there was no period of real containment of the disease in the country. The moving average remained above 500 daily deaths for most of the year, falling below this mark for the first time only on October 15. Under the impact of the increase in deaths since the end of October, the moving average has already surpassed 500 daily deaths again in the past week. In addition, the daily average of new cases remained above 20,000 throughout the pandemic with the exception of the first week in November. It is now hovering just under 30,000 new cases since November 15 and continues to rise.

Several months after the reopening of the economy by all state governors, including those belonging to the PT and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), there are not even the limited measures of containment and treatment that were implemented during the first outbreak.

The number of tests conducted in Brazil has been insufficient throughout the pandemic, with a test positivity rate of 29.3 percent in early November, almost six times higher than the 5 percent needed to track the spread of the virus. On Sunday, it was reported by the Ministry of Health that there are almost 7 million tests stored that will expire in two months. The National Council of Health Secretaries (CONASS) declared that the federal government had not provided the necessary materials to carry out the first step of testing, the collecting of samples from the population.

Faced with the beginning of the second wave of COVID-19 and the declaration of Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes that “from the government’s point of view, there is no extension” of the federal government’s emergency aid, the response of Brazil’s fascist President Jair Bolsonaro is the promotion of chauvinism against China and the incitement of an anti-vaccine movement.

After the announcement by General Eduardo Pazuello, the current minister of health, that he would buy a batch of 46 million vaccines developed by the Chinese company Sinovac, in partnership with the Butantan Institute of São Paulo, Bolsonaro immediately rejected the minister’s statement. In an interview, the president declared that “China’s we won’t buy, it’s my decision,” and stated, without any evidence, “I don’t believe it transmits enough safety to the population.” He later added: “The idea is to give space to other more reliable vaccines.”

Following the propaganda line of far-right circles, Bolsonaro insinuated that the virus was spread deliberately. He said that “unfortunately, there already exists a great discredit on the part of the population about China, even because, as many say, this virus would have been born there.”

Earlier this month, shortly after the news that a participant in the Butantan Institute’s vaccine research had died, Bolsonaro, answering a supporter on Facebook, declared that the vaccine caused “Death, disability, anomaly,” adding

morbidly, “Another win for Jair Bolsonaro.” In response to the confirmation on the same day that the volunteer had committed suicide, Bolsonaro restated his position, declaring that the death could have been caused by a “side effect” of the vaccine.

The scenario of a health system overwhelmed by the second wave of the pandemic and unable to cope was prepared with the closure of field hospitals months ago.

In September, the state government of São Paulo closed the field hospital in Ibirapuera, the last in the state, after treating more than 3,000 COVID-19 patients.

In Rio de Janeiro, where the political crisis involving corruption in the purchase of medical equipment and the construction of campaign hospitals led to the fall of the ultra-right governor, Wilson Witzel, the current governor of Rio, Claudio de Castro of the Christian Social Party (PSC), declared on Tuesday that there will be no lockdown and that the campaign hospital of São Gonçalo would be reactivated. The construction of the facility was delayed for months and made available only 40 of the 200 beds planned, before it was closed two months later. On Thursday, Carlos Alberto Chaves, the fourth Secretary of Health in the state since the beginning of the pandemic, said that there will be no reopening of the Maracanã hospital, set up on the soccer field of the Maracanã stadium and with a capacity of 400 beds, stating that it is very expensive to maintain the facilities.

The lack of any countermeasures, as insufficient as they were during the first surge, amounts to a lining up of the federal and state governments in implementing a de facto herd immunity policy.

Surgeries and treatments that could only be offered in hospitals had been suspended during the beginning of the pandemic and were being performed in recent months. A survey by the Oncoguia Institute revealed that 59 percent of patients in the public health network reported that the pandemic affected cancer treatments in March and April, and that this figure was 41 percent in July. The new COVID-19 outbreak is forcing health units to postpone or cancel many of these treatments again due to a lack of beds. Last Thursday, November 19, in the state of São Paulo, new elective surgeries were suspended, and it was announced that the beds prepared for COVID-19 patients would not be closed.

Workers in the hospitals have been working for months without rest or vacations, having to adapt to the new isolation conditions under the impact of the pandemic, and in many cases having to care for infected patients without adequate personal protective equipment and infrastructure.

Under conditions of complete lack of preparation for the second wave of COVID-19 and indifference to the

exhaustion of these healthcare workers, their revolt has been expressed in demonstrations and strikes throughout the country.

In the state of Rondônia, which registered a 107 percent increase in COVID-19 cases in October and where the occupation rate of the ICU beds rose from 38.4 percent to 59.1 percent between October and November, nurses and health professionals carried out a strike throughout the state, demanding that the government move forward on a proposed plan for career paths, positions and wages (PCCR), whose deadline expired in early September. The three health care unions that participated in the strike ended it a few days later with promises to pressure the government to present a proposal. For its part, the government declared that it would support a federal decree, “which prohibits any salary readjustment, wage increases, including the implementation of the PCCR by January 2022.”

In the capital of Rio de Janeiro, at the Bonsucesso Federal Hospital, a fire caused by years of cuts in health care provoked a strike last week on November 17. Workers denounced the lack of information on the progress of repairs after the fire and the mandatory transfer without warning of workers to other units. On Friday of last week, employees of São João Batista Hospital went on strike over a delay in their salaries and the lack of medical equipment. Some of the equipment had begun to be removed from the unit, managed by a Social Organization hired by the government.

In the Federal District, cleaning employees at the state hospitals went on strike two weeks ago over the delay in the payment of their salaries. Last year, the employees had denounced the lack of sufficient staff in the hospitals, where patients’ families had to clean the corridors and rooms themselves.



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