

Medical workers protest across Mexico as President AMLO continues to downplay pandemic

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Exhausted after eight months of the pandemic, fearful of a new surge, and threatened against speaking out, health care workers across Mexico have been involved in a growing wave of demonstrations against unsafe conditions, lack of pay and over other demands.

The country has reported several new records of daily cases since November 25, while the seven-day running average of daily deaths has nearly doubled since mid-October to 570. In total, the country has reported 1.1 million cases and 108,000 deaths, the fourth highest death toll in the world. But testing is remarkably low, with about half of tests coming out positive.

Hospitals are rapidly filling up again. After nearly 150,000 health care workers have contracted the virus and almost 2,000 have died, they still lack the necessary protective equipment.

On Monday, World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that Mexico is in “bad shape” and that rising cases and deaths were “worrisome.” Alluding to Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO), who often doesn’t wear masks in public and constantly minimizes the danger of the pandemic, the WHO chief added, “We would like to ask Mexico to be very serious ... and we expect leaders to be examples.”

Since early November, protests in hospitals have included rallies, marches and several threats of strikes. These have concentrated in the two main hotspots of the pandemic in the country, Mexico City and the state of Chihuahua, which borders Texas.

As countries all over the world face spikes due to capitalist governments refusing to carry out the necessary shutdowns to contain the virus, recent weeks have also seen an upsurge in strikes and other forms of

protests among health care workers internationally—from Spain to Chile, South Africa, Kenya, and the US states of Pennsylvania and New York.

Protesting workers in the Mexican capital and its metropolitan area have denounced insufficient protective equipment, personnel and medicines. A worker at the Carlos MacGregor Sánchez hospital in Mexico City said COVID-19 patients are being intubated while conscious because of a shortage of anesthetics, while there is a ratio of one specialist per 10 patients. At the José Vicente Villada Hospital in the State of Mexico, a worker explained to *Noticias por el mundo*: “We are not at 100 percent capacity because patients are dying quickly. Five died on Friday and were taken to the refrigerated truck.”

Throughout November, workers at the Ajusco Medio Hospital in Mexico City have carried out several marches and roadblocks to demand the formalization of all contracts on an equal basis, and to protest the lack of any wage increase in 10 years.

Medical workers at the Women’s Hospital of Chihuahua carried out a demonstration to protest lack of equipment and personnel—exposing the fact that this had resulted in deaths of patients and even postponed births due to a lack of gloves. The union SMEEICH has threatened to strike.

Workers at the ISSSTE Hospital in Chihuahua city carried out a demonstration occupying an entrance this week, denouncing the administration and the trade union, which both simply ignore their demands. One nurse revealed that a co-worker died of coronavirus while waiting in line to be attended, while another explained, “The staff works tooth and nail; we all suffer

a lack of equipment and are worried about our health. At least four people are dying each day; the areas are saturated.”

The National Union of Workers for Mexico’s Health (UNTSM), a group of health care workers organized on social media in response to the pandemic, organized a mobilization in Mexico City on November 27.

José Benito Gómez Velasco, a nurse who traveled from Chiapas to Mexico City for the UNTSM protest, demanded the formalization of nurses’ contracts with all social benefits. “We demand a stop to repression by the authorities for asking for protective equipment,” he said. “The reinstallation of all health care workers fired during the pandemic is urgent.”

In Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, hospital workers have also carried out several marches and threatened strikes. They are demanding the payment of a promised COVID-19 bonus, and the stipulated Christmas bonus and *aguinaldo* —an end-of-the-year bonus paid across Latin America and Europe that in Mexico involves the payment of an extra fortnight. “They are withholding those payments. We need them to pay our bills and we can’t afford them without our bonus and *aguinaldo*,” said a nurse to *Border Report*.

Doctors at the Women’s Hospital in Chihuahua have also told reporters that, just like the factory workers and others who show up at their hospitals sick, they too are denied tests, forcing them to get tested at their own expense.

Doctors at the Regional Hospital of Chihuahua also carried out several days of protests outside the building during breaks to demand unpaid bonuses. “What we know is that in Chihuahua they tell you: there is no money, and there is no money,” said a doctor to reporters.

Nurses at the Central Hospital of San Luis Potosí took to social media on December 1 to protest against being overworked, while not getting paid salaries, the *aguinaldo* and other benefits.

On Wednesday, in response to the growing pressure from medical workers and the WHO, AMLO, the Mexican president, likened any lockdowns to “dictatorship,” insisting “the fundamental thing is to guarantee liberty.” He then relativized the need to wear masks, claiming, “Everyone is free. Whoever wants to wear a mask and feels safer is welcome to do so.”

Meanwhile, the National Guard his government

created is being deployed across the country against protests, including by medical workers. Just last month, six guardsmen were arrested for persecuting and shooting down farmers protesting a hydroelectric plant causing a drought near Chihuahua City. They killed one woman.

Also on Wednesday, the AMLO administration began its “Programa Paisano” which will receive approximately half a million Mexican citizens living in the United States and Canada for the holidays, despite an existing ban for nonessential travel across the US-Mexico border. The United States is currently seeing record cases.

López Obrador, who has aligned himself with the efforts of Donald Trump to establish a presidential dictatorship in the US underpinned by fascistic anti-immigrant forces, published a video on social media encouraging the migrants to risk their lives and those of their loved ones for the holidays. “You deserve the best of treatment, to be received like heroes—our migrant countrymen,” he said.

The only “best treatment” and “liberty” his administration is defending is that of the corporate elite to extract profits from workers facing unsafe conditions and of Wall Street to keep plundering Mexico’s public treasury, with AMLO prioritizing debt payments over health expenditures and social assistance during the crisis.

The overwhelming of the hospitals, and the infections and deaths among health care workers are the direct result of these deliberate policies of social austerity and reckless reopening of nonessential businesses, which subordinate the lives of workers to the profits of the ruling class.



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