

Brazilian Morenoites join Bolsonaro in promoting hydroxychloroquine against COVID-19

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Alongside the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths around the world, a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic is spreading uncontrollably throughout Brazil. This week, 18 of Brazil's 26 states and the Federal District reported an increase in the moving average of deaths and in six of them, ICUs are on the brink of collapse.

Brazil has more than 7 million coronavirus cases and some 188,000 deaths, trailing only the US and India in the number of cases, and only the US in deaths.

If a pandemic like this one was already foreseen and foreseeable, this is even more true for its second wave. However, since July, one-third of the ICUs created exclusively for COVID-19 treatment in Brazil have been deactivated. This further exposes the homicidal herd immunity policy of fascist President Jair Bolsonaro's government and of state governors, including those of the Workers Party (PT), the supposed opposition.

Today, Bolsonaro's herd immunity policy is taking the form of an anti-China and anti-vaccine campaign that threatens to fatally undermine the broad vaccination of the Brazilian population next year. At the same time, Bolsonaro has frenetically promoted medicines that have no scientific evidence of being effective against COVID-19, such as hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) and the vermifuge ivermectin, to force the end of the few remaining lockdown measures in Brazil.

In this context, the international and Brazilian pseudo-left has sought to give a left cover to the herd immunity policy of the global ruling elite. In September, *Jacobin* magazine promoted one of the academic proponents of this policy, Martin Kulldorff, who would become one of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration "of death." In Brazil, this example is being followed by the Brazilian section of the Morenoite Trotskyist Fraction, the Revolutionary Workers Movement (MRT), on its *Esquerda Diário* website.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil, the MRT's leading member, Gilson Dantas, has written articles defending the use of HCQ, and, more recently, ivermectin against COVID-19. In an April 15 article titled "The medical debate on hydroxychloroquine and the health irresponsibility of Bolsonaro," he attempts in vain to differentiate his position from that of the fascist president, saying that although it is "demagogically defended by extreme-right governments," the left has "challenged or ignored" HCQ "with the allegation that its effectiveness 'has not been verified' against COVID-19."

He mentions observational trials with HCQ in China, where "hydroxychloroquine became official guidance in COVID-19 treatment," and in France, where Dr. Didier Raoult "managed to knock down the viral load of all patients and zero that of those who associated azithromycin with hydroxychloroquine, in SIX days."

Without questioning the serious limitations of the Chinese and French trials, he states, "unequivocally, hydroxychloroquine had a positive,

concrete clinical effect." This, however, is far from true. Trials to verify the efficacy of a medicine must be randomized, double blind and conducted with a control group. In none of the studies provided by Dantas did this happen. Dr. Raoult's study was also retracted by the *International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents* on April 3 for "failing to meet expected [scientific] quality standards." All this was widely reported before Dantas wrote his article promoting HCQ.

Dantas' article was published soon after Trump and Bolsonaro started a frenetic campaign in March for the use of HCQ against COVID-19. In Brazil, this campaign was lent a pseudo-scientific cover by right-wing scientists who defended the use of HCQ. The most vocal of these scientists has been Paolo Zanotto, a leading virologist at the University of São Paulo (USP). Dantas also used Zanotto's "scientific authority" to justify his defense of HCQ.

In an article published in the daily *Folha de S. Paulo* on April 7, Zanotto wrote that, in a pandemic, "we don't have time to wait for the results of clinical evaluations," adding, "the most reasonable thing is early treatment with hydroxychloroquine." Even with all the long-known HCQ side effects, this same argument would be repeated by a group of scientists called "Teachers for Freedom" in two letters sent to Bolsonaro in April and May in which they defended early COVID-19 treatment with HCQ. Created last year by supporters of the president, the "Teachers for Freedom" say they fight against the "ideological persecution and the hegemony by the left" in universities.

The spokesman for the letters was former chemistry professor at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Marcos Eberlim, who today coordinates the Discovery Institute in Brazil and chairs the creationist Brazilian Society of Intelligent Design. They called for a rejection of the "scientific consensus," i.e., "double-blind multi-centric clinical trials" to allow the use of HCQ. Eberlim also justified this by saying that he works in "an area of science that studies our origins, in which a theory [Darwin's theory of evolution] is presented as full scientific consensus," but "there are more doubts than certainties."

After the April articles, it took Dantas five months to advocate the use of HCQ again. On September 15, *Esquerda Diário* promoted Dantas' book, "Coronavirus: the disease and treatment options." Repeating the early arguments, but without mentioning HCQ, he says that the book presents "data that show the ability of two drugs to zero the viral load in vivo and in humans, through numerous clinical trials of sequence of cases, which point to the unmistakable clinical utility of such drugs to avoid lethal outcomes of the disease." This statement has no scientific basis.

His latest article on this subject, published on December 2 on *Esquerda Diário* with the title "Treatment of COVID-19 disease: against Bolsonaro and in favor of science," makes an open defense of the use of HCQ and also of ivermectin. After months in which countless studies failed to show

the effectiveness of HCQ against COVID-19, most notably the British Recovery Trial in June and the World Health Organization's Solidarity trial in October, Dantas insists that "clinical experiences from countries like France, China and others ... are saving lives."

Dantas' article does not quote any recent studies demonstrating the efficacy of HCQ and ivermectin. However, it does contain five photos of reports with studies that show the alleged effectiveness of HCQ and its supposed beneficial use in Indonesia, Portugal and Costa Rica. All reports were published between May 17 and July 2 on the Quinina website, which in its header has a banner of Dr. Didier Raoult's "Fondation Méditerranée Infection."

Among the many publications on the website created to promote HCQ against COVID-19 are several writings and videos by Paolo Zanotto. In one of the videos, Zanotto opposes lockdown measures in the most reactionary terms, saying that they are part of a "cultural" or "values war" to "manipulate reality and impose another one," that is, "alter daily life in a sudden way, which the Jacobins did, the Bolsheviks did, which the Nazis tried to do in Germany." Such reactionary views are also shared by Dr. Raoult, who in January downplayed the pandemic, and is also known to deny global warming and Darwin's theory of evolution.

Esquerda Diário's response to Dantas' defense of the use of HCQ against COVID-19 and its alignment with such right-wing elements could not be more cynical and unprincipled. Since September, his articles have been accompanied by a note stating that Dantas' position "does not represent the opinion of the MRT, which is neither against nor in favor of medicines for COVID-19 disease, nor does it defend the debate on the treatment of COVID-19."

Nothing could expose more clearly the petty-bourgeois character of this organization, along with its criminal irresponsibility and contempt for the lives of workers that are being lost daily to the deadly pandemic. The MRT is "neither against nor in favor" of the promotion of false information and reactionary theories that can only lead to even more deaths.

This response, on the one hand, is utterly hostile to the efforts of Marxism to carefully address the most advanced scientific fields. With the COVID-19 pandemic, this became even more essential to analyze the new coronavirus, the disease and its intersections with society, and to elaborate a program of action that preserves the health and life of the international working class. On the other hand, it ignores the numerous articles previously published on Esquerda Diário by Dantas and others that openly promoted pseudo-scientific "alternative therapies."

In 2015 and 2016, Brazil witnessed a broad debate on phosphoethanolamine, a drug that was produced and distributed for 20 years by USP chemistry professor Gilberto Chierice as the "cure for cancer." In 2015, Brazil's health agency, Anvisa, ordered the suspension of the production and distribution of phosphoethanolamine, because, until then, no clinical trials had been done to demonstrate its effectiveness. Later clinical trials would show that it has no efficacy.

At the time, Dantas and Esquerda Diário widely denounced the end of phosphoethanolamine distribution to cancer patients. Dantas even claimed that the drug "has therapeutic power [unless we imagine that thousands are lying...]," and that the corporate media, allied to "Big Pharma," manipulated public opinion to show the opposite. He also tried to base his position in defense of phosphoethanolamine on the "theory about cancer" of the 1931 Medicine Nobel Prize winner Otto Warburg, who, according to him, "was never taken seriously by official oncology."

In fact, official oncology abandoned Warburg's thesis after it became clear in the '70s that cancer is caused by genetic mutations. In addition to its invocation in support of Chierice's defense of phosphoethanolamine, Warburg's thesis is also used by quack physician Lair Ribeiro to promote alternative treatments such as coconut oil and a ketogenic diet against cancer. Ribeiro, who had already been mentioned by Dantas as a

"scientific authority" in an article that downplayed the effectiveness of chemotherapy against cancer with a study widely criticized by the scientific community, recently also advocated the use of HCQ against COVID-19.

Just as today, the defense of HCQ joins Esquerda Diário with Bolsonaro, the same thing happened around the phosphoethanolamine case. In 2016, Bolsonaro, then a federal deputy, was the author of a bill that allowed the use of the drug even without scientific evidence. The bill had the broad support of PT congressmen, and then-PT president Dilma Rousseff sanctioned it just before she was impeached.

In addition, Dantas and Bolsonaro used the same argument in favor of phosphoethanolamine at the time: for the current president, Anvisa should "ensure that each citizen is free to seek a cure," while for Dantas the use of the drug was based on the "right to freedom of the patient over his own body." This is also the same outlook that today underlies the anti-vaccination position of Bolsonaro in favor of the "freedoms of Brazilians" and that of the creationist Eberlim, for whom the "scientific consensus" should be abandoned to promote drugs without scientific evidence and the alleged scientific bases of the creation of the world by God.

The anti-scientific and anti-Marxist character of Dantas' position can only be explained by his political and social origins. Before joining the MRT, he was a member in the '70s and '80s of the ultra-Pabloite Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party, the Brazilian section of the International founded by Argentinean Juan Posadas in 1961. The party was one of the many revisionist tendencies that took part in the creation of the PT and liquidated itself into it.

As a physician who specialized in "traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture," as he stressed in a short autobiography published in a 2017 book on Trotskyism in Brazil, Dantas represents an upper-middle-class section of the population, for whom Esquerda Diário speaks, that for decades has embraced one or another form of postmodern irrationalism and abandoned the objective foundations of modern science itself.

The real problem is not modern science, as its postmodern detractors claim, but the fact that capitalism represents a barrier to scientific development and harnessing it to serve the social needs of the vast majority of the world's population. Today, with the COVID-19 pandemic, this contradiction has been fully exposed. The only possible solution to it is the one advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International: a globally coordinated emergency response to the pandemic as part of an international struggle for socialism.



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