

Brazilian workers exposed to infections and death as meat-processing industry reaps record profits

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Brazil entered the year 2021 surpassing the terrible milestone of 195,000 COVID-19 deaths. This death toll, exceeded only by the United States, is growing at a ferocious pace, with the highest number of deaths since mid-August being recorded on December 29, 1,224 in total.

Amid this spiral of deaths, workplaces and economic activities in general remain entirely open. A recent coronavirus outbreak in a meat-processing plant in Brazil's southern region sounds the alarm over the serious dangers confronting the working class.

On December 19, a plant owned by Seara in Seberi, in the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul, received a court order to test all its employees after 127 of them tested positive for COVID-19. The facility employs 1,241 workers in total, all of whom have potentially been exposed to the virus.

A number of criminal conditions in the operation of the plant led to the mass infection of workers. Rio Grande do Sul's Public Ministry of Labor (MPT-RS), which filed a lawsuit against the company, found: "[S]ymptomatic employees who continued working; absence of dismissals from work in 157 cases of outpatient care related to symptoms compatible with COVID-19, of which 19 were related to members of risk groups; dismissal orders for periods of less than 14 days in 43 cases, of which 32 remained less than 10 days away from work; increase in the rhythm and working hours, reaching shifts of more than 12 hours a day... ."

Since November, the company summoned women up to 7 months pregnant to work. The MPT's lawsuit states that two pregnant workers were seen in the company's outpatient clinic, presenting symptoms of COVID-19, and were advised to continue working. The same occurred with workers with comorbidities such as obesity, hypertension and heart disease.

Workers treated by the municipal health care system, who were on medical leave waiting for the results of their COVID-19 exams, were harassed by the company, given "rapid tests" in their own homes, and forced to return to work if the result was negative. There were cases of workers who tested negative, returned to the factory, and then had infections confirmed in the RT-PCR test, "a serious conduct that propitiates the explosion of contamination in the facility," the MPT noted.

These facts reveal in a sinister way how the company's management consciously adopted a policy that leads to the systematic contamination of workers. This policy is not restricted, however, to the Seberi plant.

Referring to the functioning of the meat-packing industry as a

whole, the MPT's lawsuit observes: "Despite being an activity where hygiene is essential, the focus of these sanitary measures is *on the product*, and the way the work is developed in these companies exposes the workers to a risk of contagion considerably higher than in other activities: It has a large number of employees, who work remarkably closely, in closed, humid and air-conditioned environments, are transported by the defendant's vehicles, in confinement over long distances and can crowd both at the beginning and end of the workday (and at rest stops)."

The meat-processing plants were responsible for spreading COVID-19 not only among their own workers, but throughout municipalities and entire regions of Brazil. In Rio Grande do Sul, which concentrates an important part of this industry, these impacts are striking.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the MPT-RS prosecutor who filed the lawsuit against Seara, Priscila Dibi Schvarz, also a member of the MPT's national project on meat industry working conditions. Schvarz said: "The first case in several cities of Rio Grande do Sul was of meat industry workers, even before health professionals. We crossed the employment links in the sector with COVID-19 cases, and the relationship between workers in the sector and confirmed cases was very clear.

"Today we have 54 meat processing plants in the state with confirmed cases since the beginning of the pandemic. There are 10,448 cases [of infected workers] in total. There were 10 direct deaths and 11 secondary deaths."

Even as several meat plants have adopted routine tests, recommended by the MPT, their results greatly underestimate the reality. "As in any activity, not all people are tested, it is a percentage," said Schvarz. "We cannot know how many workers have already been exposed; but it is very likely that we do have this gap. Especially considering that when we did long-term serological surveys, the results were up to 10 times higher."

The outbreak at the Seara's plant in Seberi coincided with a new surge of COVID-19 cases in Rio Grande do Sul, which began in late November. On December 23, the state registered the highest number of cases and deaths in a single day since the beginning of the pandemic—6,362 new cases and 144 deaths.

The interrelationship between this new rise in infections and the activity of the meat industry is openly recognized by the Secretariat of Health of Rio Grande do Sul. In its December 16 epidemiological bulletin, it pointed out that the three regions with "higher rates of confirmed cases... also concentrate 71 percent of outbreaks occurring

in meat-processing plants and dairy product factories.”

According to Schvarz, the JBS group, the largest meat-processing company in the world, and owner of Seara, is the most resistant to adopting the recommendations issued by MPT in late March. “We have already filed 29 public civil lawsuits [against meat-processing plants], 20 of which against the JBS-Seara group. Only then did companies like JBS conduct tests,” she said. A hundred other meat processing plants, on the other hand, have signed the so-called Adjustment of Conduct Terms (TAC).

The MPT’s declared objective with these TACs is not to interfere with capitalist production, but to ensure that it obeys certain operating standards. “At first, the sector understood that they were unfeasible measures,” said Schvarz, “but with the growth of cases, they began to be implemented in a more receptive manner... All these measures, which they said that would halt the production, had zero impact on productivity. On the contrary, the sector has hired many people.”

In order to not interfere with production, the measures tolerate practices that are eminently unsafe. At first, the TACs determined that workers should wear fabric masks, because appropriate face masks (of the PFF2 type) were lacking in Brazil.

The measures do not even require the closure of a facility in the case of confirmed infections among workers. “It depends, if there are a certain number of cases and the people were in activity, there may be a stoppage,” the prosecutor declared. “But when the system is well controlled in a company, it is not necessary to close it.”

Schvarz also noted that companies have complained to the MPT that “many workers end up getting tired [of the measures], and it is perceived that it generates an increase [of infections].” One can only imagine what it is like to maintain these strict measures while carrying one of the most arduous jobs, in conditions of intensification of production and under strenuous shifts of up to 12 hours.

Why, despite their recognized homicidal potential, are these plants being kept functioning under such conditions? The fundamental interests of two different social classes are here in irreconcilable conflict.

From the standpoint of the capitalists, the mass deaths of the working class represent no more than collateral damage in the massive generation of profits. According to the Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA), “[Brazil’s] agribusiness trade balance had a record trade surplus and exports from January to November 2020.” Celebrating a positive balance of US\$ 81.9 billion, they highlight beef as the main export product after soybeans.

The JBS group, in particular, closed the third quarter of 2020 with a net profit 778.2 percent higher than that recorded in the same period in 2019. Its Ebitda (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) was up 35 percent, driven by the operations of JBS USA Pork, up 64.7 percent, and Seara, up 55.4 percent.

The socially destructive interests of this capitalist oligarchy find their most direct spokesperson in Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro. On December 28, during a “charity event,” Bolsonaro attacked journalists for wearing face masks, saying: “Now it’s no use hiding from the virus, ...this virus will stay with us for all of our lives. We can’t stand lockdowns anymore, more restrictive measures that break up the economy.” There is a sinister parallel between this profoundly sociopathic declaration and the murderous policy adopted in meat processing plants like the one in Seberí.

The interests of the working class, on the other hand, find no expression in any official political force. The cowardly bourgeois opposition to Bolsonaro, led by the Workers Party (PT), is incapable

of challenging the government’s central policy towards the pandemic, since it also insists that the social interest in preserving lives should not interfere with the capitalist economy.

In their first public statement in months, on December 17, the trade unions that claim to represent the meat industry workers, the CNTA and CONTAC, demanded that government prioritizes the vaccination of workers in the sector. Their main and only argument is that production in the meat plants cannot stop.

Covering up the social murder policy of the ruling class, the CNTA and CONTAC argue that “the food industries, during this period of pandemic, not only maintained their production, but also raised their productivity level,” criminally identifying the capitalist drive for increased profits with the “responsibility of guaranteeing food, for the maintenance of Brazilian food security.”

While a vaccination schedule is awaited, thousands of lives are being lost in Brazil. The situation demands emergency action by the working class:

- Nonessential workplaces must be shut down;

- What production should be maintained must be decided by the workers themselves, based on the interests of society and not of individual accumulation;

- The conditions under which this production is carried out must maintain the full security of workers and their families;

- Safety protocols should be developed with the assistance of scientists and medical professionals and should be implemented under worker control.

To be implemented, these measures require that workers break from the control of the trade unions, establishing rank-and-file safety committees in meat-processing plants and every other workplace. The most fundamental task is the development of an independent political movement of the working class to put an end to capitalism and take the reins of society into its own hands.



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