

Brazil reaches a quarter of a million COVID-19 deaths

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With 1,390 new deaths recorded on Wednesday, Brazil surpassed the milestone of 250,000 deaths from COVID-19, one day after reaching 10 million infections. This abominable number represents 10 percent of all coronavirus deaths on the planet, in a country that does not even constitute 3 percent of the world's population.

This week also marks one year since the confirmation of the first COVID-19 case in Brazil, on February 26, 2020. After this long period of suffering and hardship imposed upon the Brazilian working masses, the pandemic remains totally out of control, with thousands of lives being lost every day and various parts of the country being pushed to the limit.

The northern region of Brazil as a whole has suffered a severe impact in recent months. Amazonas, whose capital Manaus had a health care collapse in January, has already recorded more COVID-19 deaths in the first 54 days of this year than during all of 2020. The number of hospital admissions in the state remains high, and hundreds of patients in serious condition await an ICU bed. This week, shocking images were released of a hospital in the city of Parintins where intubated patients are being strapped to their stretchers for lack of sufficient sedatives.

The neighboring state of Acre declared a state of public calamity on Monday. The state is facing the catastrophic combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, an outbreak of dengue fever, and floods that have already affected 130,000 people in 10 of the state's municipalities, including the capital. Hospitals are on the verge of collapse, and a record 621 new cases were recorded on Tuesday. The right-wing governor Gladson Cameli, of the Progressive Party (PP), said he only has resources for the next three months and compared the situation to a "third world war."

It is highly likely that the more contagious P.1 variant of COVID-19, originally discovered in Manaus, is circulating in Acre, which received patients after the hospitals collapsed in the neighboring state. The Brazilian Ministry of Health said on Tuesday that cases of this new variant have already been reported in 17 states in all five regions of the country.

In the southeast region, the São Paulo government of Governor João Doria, of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), has decreed a so-called "restrictive curfew" to allegedly limit the circulation of people between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., which will go into effect next Friday. The state, which has seen more than 58,000 deaths and nearly 2 million confirmed cases, registered its highest number of ICU patients this week.

The situation is especially devastating in municipalities in the countryside of São Paulo. Last Sunday, Araraquara declared a lockdown, which was followed by smaller municipalities in the region. With cases of community transmission of the P.1 variant of COVID-19, the city reached maximum capacity in its hospitals last Tuesday. Other cities like Campinas, with more than a million inhabitants, have also reached maximum capacity of its ICU beds, and the cities of the industrial ABC region are approaching the same level.

The brutal conditions faced in the Amazonian hospitals are being reenacted in São Paulo. This was underscored this week by the resignation of 15 of the 24 resident doctors at the Pimentas Bonsucesso Municipal Hospital, in Guarulhos, in the Greater São Paulo region, in protest over the lack of medications and the precarious conditions of the medical unit. According to one of the residents, interviewed by the newspaper *Agora*, "The situation really got worse at the end of last year and the beginning of this one, because there was no way to replace the medications, which were in short supply."

The same doctor reports that, as in the hospital at Parintins, there is a lack of sedatives for intubated patients: "This doesn't allow them to relax, preventing the equipment [ventilators] from working effectively. I witnessed a [COVID-19] patient die by biting the hose [that takes oxygen to the lung], because the intubation was not working, due to the fact that he was conscious."

The northeast region of Brazil has had the largest increase in infections in the last week, up by 26 percent. The state of Ceará, governed by Camilo Santana of the Workers Party (PT), has practically filled up its ICU beds, and the number of cases and deaths is increasing, especially in countryside municipalities. Bahia, the largest state in the region, governed by Rui Costa also of the PT, recorded on Tuesday the highest number of ICU admissions for the fifth consecutive day.

The situation is equally critical in the southern region of Brazil, with its three states recording a hospital occupancy rate close to or above 90 percent. Last Friday, the governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Eduardo Leite of the PSDB, declared the suspension of activities in public places from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., just like his party colleague in São Paulo. The state also has a record rate of occupancy of ICU beds.

In the face of this catastrophe, Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro maintains his policy of "war on lockdowns," declared in just these terms in May of last year. At an official event on

January 28, Bolsonaro gave a frantic speech: “The policy of closing everything did not work. The Brazilian people are strong, the Brazilian people are not afraid of danger. We know who are the vulnerable, the elderly and those with comorbidities. The rest have to work!” On this Tuesday he made this same point once again: “Lockdowns didn’t solve anything last year, will they solve it this year? Now, how will the economy look?”

Speaking on behalf of the Brazilian ruling class, this would-be Mussolini seeks to push the working class to its death in infected workplaces in order to maximize capitalist profits. All parties in the Brazilian political system have aligned themselves with this criminal policy.

Seeking to free itself and its allies from responsibility for the pandemic catastrophe, the traditional newspaper of the bourgeoisie, *O Estado de São Paulo*, declared in its Wednesday editorial: “One doesn’t arrive at a state of calamity like this without an unbelievable succession of errors. Brazil’s situation is the worst possible. Contributing to this result were the neglect and incompetence of President Jair Bolsonaro and his Health Minister, Eduardo Pazuello, the uncontrolled spread of a new strain of coronavirus identified in Manaus, the P.1 variant, potentially more contagious, and the careless behavior of many citizens who, following the bad example of President Bolsonaro, insist on disregarding the protective measures recommended by health authorities.”

The response of Bolsonaro and the Brazilian establishment to the pandemic was not a “succession of errors,” but a conscious policy of social murder. The development of the coronavirus variant identified in Manaus, treated by *Estadão* as a misfortune, is the most conclusive proof of the devastating consequences of the nefarious “herd immunity” policy adopted by the ruling class.

In the same anti-scientific spirit, this newspaper maintains that the resumption of face-to-face classes is absolutely safe, and has viciously attacked the teachers in São Paulo who are militantly opposing the reopening of classrooms in the midst of such a “state of calamity.”

O Estado de São Paulo accused the educators of “denying the new generations the basic training they need to emancipate themselves socially, culturally and professionally. And morally.” It continued: “[I]n a period of enormous difficulties like the present, by refusing to accept their share of sacrifices and resorting to strike action to make it impossible for the school year to begin, the teachers miss the opportunity to give a lesson of civility to their students and to society itself.”

There is no essential difference between this grotesque demand that teachers “accept their share of sacrifices” and Bolsonaro’s fascist back-to-work speech. *Estadão* is acting as no more than a mouthpiece for the PSDB government in São Paulo, which has now enacted a farcical lockdown, fighting the supposed “careless behavior of many citizens,” without backing down a single inch in its criminal reopening of schools, which will put more than 30 percent of the state’s population, between educators and students, in the streets and into enclosed classrooms.

A notable event this week was the departure of renowned Brazilian scientist Miguel Nicolelis from the scientific committee of the Northeast Consortium. Nicolelis had assumed the direction

of this committee in early 2020 with the perspective of contributing to a science-based policy to combat the pandemic. The researcher has been warning of the need for a real policy of social distancing. “Either the country goes into a national lockdown immediately, or we won’t be able to handle burying our dead in 2021,” he tweeted in January.

As *Folha de São Paulo* reported, “[p]eople close to him say that the decision is due to Nicolelis’ dissatisfaction with the failure of governments to adopt the guidelines indicated by the committee’s scientists.” The newspaper also reported that one of the committee’s participants stated that their feeling “is that the governors are not acting so differently from the federal government.”

The same political forces behind the Northeast Consortium, the PT and its allies in the so-called opposition to Bolsonaro, such as the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), are also behind the reactionary Brazilian unions that are fighting to break the teachers strikes in São Paulo and throughout Brazil, and to prevent their unification with different sections of the working class to promote a general strike that stops all non-essential production and puts the pandemic under control.

These interests were clearly expressed by the ABC Metalworkers Union (SMABC), the political cradle of the PT and one of the main Brazilian trade unions, which responded to the farcical “restrictive curfew” of the PSDB government in São Bernardo do Campo, not by demanding a real policy of social distancing that shuts down factories and other workplaces, but by suggesting that the government makes the measures more flexible to allow workers to get to their jobs!

The president of the union, Wagner Santana, declared: “São Bernardo is not isolated from the other cities. We have to think about the worker who will leave the company at night and won’t have transportation. We will not accept that, after a workday, the worker has no way to return home and is exposed on the street to the dangers of the early morning.”

These are compelling proofs that no political force connected to the capitalist state, no matter in which shade of red it tries to disguise itself, offers a genuine basis to effectively stop the spread of the virus. Only the independent political mobilization of the working class guided by a socialist and internationalist program will put an end to the continuing nightmare of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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