

# Mass protests erupt in Paraguay over disastrous handling of pandemic

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As COVID-19 deaths and cases reach record levels in Paraguay, mass demonstrations have erupted for a second consecutive week over the disastrous response to the pandemic by the government of the country's fascistic President Mario Abdo Benitez.

Teachers were the first to protest last week, with many refusing the mandatory return to school on Tuesday, March 2. The following day, nurses, doctors, patients and family members demonstrated outside of the main COVID-19 hospital in the capital of Asunción to protest the lack of medicines, including sedatives for intubating patients, and vaccines, even for front-line workers.

While Paraguay faces a massive surge in the pandemic that has filled all ICU beds in public hospitals, the country has received only 4,000 vaccine doses for a population of 7 million, and officials have no estimate for when more doses will arrive. Paraguay has confirmed almost 170,000 cases and 3,343 deaths.

Amid these explosive conditions, the initial actions by teachers and medical workers triggered widespread marches and roadblocks across the country. The hashtag #EstoyParaElMarzoParaguayo2021 was widely used to rally protesters, referring to the month-long protests of the "Paraguayan March" 1999.

Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni resigned last Thursday in an unsuccessful attempt to head off the growing unrest.

On Friday, in the biggest demonstration so far, over ten thousand people flooded the streets of Asunción demanding the ouster of the President Abdo Benitez and the entire Colorado Party government with the chants, "Out Marito!" and "All of them will leave!"

The use of tear gas and rubber bullets by anti-riot police set off a series of confrontations with young demonstrators. One 32-year-old man was killed under unclear circumstances, and 21 others were injured on Friday.

Demonstrations and roadblocks have been particularly large in the second most populated city, Ciudad del Este, next to the Iguazú Falls on the border with Brazil and Argentina.

As the repression continued on Saturday, Abdo announced the firing of his chief of staff, Juan Ernesto Villamayor, the minister for women, Nilda Romero, and Education Minister

Eduardo Petta. Demonstrators had attacked Petta, in particular, over the reckless reopening of schools.

The new health minister, Julio Borba, said yesterday that the government was "considering" a two-week suspension of in-person instruction—a wholly inadequate measure. Medical experts such as Gloria Meza, president of the main doctors' association, insist that only a return to strict lockdown measures can contain the surge in cases.

The government's announcements and reshuffling have done little to appease the protest movement, which expresses a broader, international intensification of the class struggle against the almost universal policy of placing profits and social austerity over lives during the pandemic.

Even more fundamentally, protesters have made clear that their anger is being fueled by the staggering levels of social inequality exposed by the crisis.

Magui, a Paraguayan demonstrator, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* that "it all began with a march organized on social media due to the president's horrible management even before the pandemic. The health care system collapsed years ago—there are no beds, no medicines, we help each other. There are no medicines for the people!"

"We are sick of the Colorado Party, sick of being governed by a son of the dictatorship like [President Abdo]," she said, referring to the fact that Abdó's father was the personal secretary of the fascist dictator Alfredo Stroessner.

Magui added: "I hope that the protests spread. I think almost all Latin America is facing the same situation. ... I believe a unified struggle would have a great impact."

Opposition parties around the Great Renewed National Alliance (GANAR), led by the right-wing Liberal Party and the pseudo-left Guasú Front of ex-president Fernando Lugo, have so far struggled to control the unrest.

They have introduced futile motions in Congress to impeach Abdo, without having enough votes to proceed. Liberal leader Efraín Alegre feigned support for the protests and made demagogic and vague calls for a "new model," while Fernando Lugo has promoted the impeachment drive while declaring, "We don't agree with changing people, we demand a change of the face of the country."

The pandemic has shown, however, that whatever the

political colors, or ostensible “model,” including that of Lugo’s close Peronist allies in Argentina, all capitalist governments across the region and beyond have advanced fundamentally the same response of reckless reopenings at the behest of the financial oligarchies.

What is most important for Abdo, is the support of Washington. In a March 1 letter, US President Joe Biden thanked Abdo for congratulating him on his election, adding: “I appreciate your government’s engagement on security issues and coordination with regional partners.” Subsequently, the White House has remained quiet on the repression of peaceful protests by the Paraguayan authorities.

## Abdo’s disastrous pandemic response

In late March, 2020, Abdó implemented a strict lockdown, including night curfews and the shutdown of nonessential activities. The general director of Health Care Services, Juan Carlos Portillo, explained later, “We were conscious that our health care system is weak.”

As early as May 4, however, an “Intelligent Confinement” was implemented to gradually lift restrictions. Even by June 15, when restaurants and bars opened, only 13 coronavirus deaths had been reported. In late July, movies, religious services and other cultural gatherings were permitted, and the remaining restrictions were lifted by early October. Contrary to most of the region, schools were allowed to reopen on a “voluntary” basis. Predictably, cases and deaths saw a massive surge starting in July that has continued until today.

During 2020, according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, the limited social assistance for nonessential workers and those going unemployed to shelter at home was on average just 34 percent of the poverty line. In a country where one-fifth of households live under official poverty and 60 percent of workers depend upon the unprotected, informal sector, the meager assistance compelled workers to return to work as soon as possible to avoid total immiseration. The IMF estimates that Paraguay’s GDP fell 1 percent for 2020, much less than neighboring countries.

While most countries in the region saw daily cases drop by late February after a holiday surge, Brazil and Paraguay continue to set one record after the other. In the last month, Paraguay’s seven-day moving averages jumped from 700 to 1,345 daily cases, and from 16 to 21 daily deaths.

The evolution of the pandemic in Brazil and Paraguay constitutes a grave warning for the world. Experts have suggested that the surge is a result of the spread of the more infectious variants from Brazil after thousands traveled there for the holidays; however, this has not been confirmed due to the lack of genetic tracing of the virus.

Paraguay’s Colorado Party has held power almost continuously since the Higinio Morínigo Martínez dictatorship took power in 1940, supporting the Nazis until their defeat in World War II, and then quickly shifting its allegiance to US imperialism by accepting a few months of democratic liberties.

In 1947, the Colorados prevailed in a bloody civil war against rebelling soldiers, workers and youth that the Stalinist Communist Party helped subordinate to a popular front alliance led by the oligarchic Liberal Party and the Febreristas, who had just left the Morínigo regime. The Colorados received military support from the Truman administration in the US and Juan Domingo Perón’s government in Argentina.

Continued factional disputes within the military, especially between the US-backed Stroessner wing and the Perón-backed wing led by Epifanio Méndez Fleita, were settled in a 1954 coup supported by the Eisenhower administration.

Stroessner then consolidated control until 1989 through a fascist terror regime, involving death squads, concentration camps, widespread torture and the crushing of the CP, the trade unions and a guerrilla movement. The coming to power of Stroessner was facilitated by the efforts of the Stalinists to subordinate all opposition among workers and peasants since the early 1930s to the Liberal Party and one or another faction of the military brass.

The Liberal Party is the twin party of the Paraguayan capitalist oligarchy and, like the Colorados, is subordinated to US imperialism and its financial and geopolitical interests.

The U.S.-backed Stroessner regime also carried out systematic massacres and land grabs from the indigenous populations—including the physical destruction of the Aché tribe—and, like the “left” nationalist Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, rescued and sheltered numerous Nazi officials in the post-war period.

Fernando Lugo was elected in 2008 in a coalition led by the Liberal Party and backed by the Stalinists. While using Lugo to channel opposition behind bourgeois politics, the ruling class, fearing growing expectations of social reform, overthrew Lugo in 2012 with the backing of the Obama administration.

The continued support by the Paraguayan ruling class and US imperialism for the political descendants of the barbaric Stroessner regime is a warning for workers and youth everywhere about the shift toward dictatorship and fascism by the capitalist ruling classes internationally in response to the pandemic crisis. This was most clearly shown by the January 6 coup attempt by Donald Trump in Washington itself.



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