For an independent political response of the working class to the COVID-19 catastrophe in Brazil!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Group (Brazil)
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With daily record death tolls, a nationwide collapse of the hospital system, more infectious variants spreading rapidly and less than 5 percent of the population vaccinated, the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil has reached a level of total catastrophe.

On Wednesday, the country had a record 2,349 deaths from COVID-19. With this staggering number, 50 percent higher than the peak reached during the first wave of the pandemic, Brazil has surpassed the milestone of 270,000 coronavirus deaths. Of this total, 75,941 deaths have occurred this year. On the same day, 80,955 new cases were recorded, reaching the highest number of new infections for the entire pandemic.

The severity of the collapse of the country's health care system was underscored by a statement from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, reporting that 15 of Brazil's 27 state capitals already have 90 percent of their ICU beds occupied by patients suffering severe cases of COVID-19. Another ten capitals are in an "extremely critical situation," that is, above 80 percent ICU occupation.

The prediction made by neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis, that Brazil could reach 2,000 deaths per day in the next few days, and 3,000 deaths per day in the next few weeks, is tragically coming true. This means that the next three months will see a doubling of the country's total death toll.

The scientist defined Brazil as an open-air laboratory for the creation of the most dangerous mutations of COVID-19 and possibly even a new virus, an even more infectious and lethal SARS-CoV-3. This devastating potential has already been demonstrated by the appearance of the P.1 coronavirus variant last year in Manaus, which is more contagious, and may cause re-infections and be resistant to vaccines.

The uncontrolled spiraling of the pandemic in Brazil presents grave dangers not only to Brazil's population, but to the entire planet. It is the result of the criminal herd immunity policy widely adopted by the world's ruling classes, and most aggressively promoted by the Brazilian government, which has deliberately allowed the virus to spread throughout society.

A scientific policy to fight the pandemic, with the closure of all non-essential activities followed by testing and contact tracing, was never implemented in any part of the country.

In May 2020, when Brazil had yet to record 12,000 COVID-19 deaths, representatives of the largest big business associations marched alongside the fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro to denounce the minimal restrictive measures taken by local governments, saying they "have gone too far." Bolsonaro promised the capitalists that he would wage a "war on lockdowns."

The sociopathic demands of the national bourgeoisie were resisted by not a single party of the Brazilian political establishment, including the so-called opposition led by the Workers Party (PT). On the contrary, since then, all actions taken by state governments of every political stripe have been directed at ending social distancing policies.

Educators challenge the homicidal policy of the ruling class

Even after the disastrous example of the pandemic's second wave in Europe and the United States, with record numbers of cases and deaths, and in face of the staggering rise of these numbers in Brazil itself since the end of last year, the ruling class pushed for the broad reopening of classrooms across the country. A propaganda campaign coordinated between the federal and state governments and the corporate media viciously attacked scientific conclusions that schools are major vectors for the spread of the virus and sought to overcome the widespread view among the Brazilian population that reopening schools is not safe.

In the state of São Paulo, the most affected by the coronavirus with more than 60,000 recorded deaths, Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) has defined face-to-face education as an essential service, to be continued regardless of the severity of the pandemic.

The homicidal character of this policy has already been thoroughly exposed. Since São Paulo schools started to reopen on February 1, there have already been 21 reported deaths, two of students and the rest of educators, along with 4,084 confirmed COVID-19 infections and another 24,345 suspected cases.

This situation forced Governor Doria on Thursday to announce more restrictive measures to avoid a total collapse of the health care system, while making a point of emphasizing that this is not a "lockdown." Industries and services will have their opening and closing times staggered to reduce crowding in public transportation, while private schools will be allowed to keep up to 35 percent of students in class. São Paulo state public schools will have a school recess for the next two weeks, but are scheduled to resume classes afterwards.

An even greater catastrophe has been avoided by the independent action of educators in São Paulo, who went on strike against the school reopenings on February 8 in the state public network, and three days later in the capital's municipal school system. Last Saturday, private school teachers in São Paulo also voted to begin a strike starting this Thursday.

After a month, the teachers strike in São Paulo is at a critical juncture. The strike is continuing due solely to the determination of rank-and-file educators, who are facing deliberate sabotage by the unions. Both the APEOESP and SINPEEM, the largest educators unions in São Paulo, are working relentlessly to divide teachers, suppress their independent initiatives and wear them down in order to bury the strike.

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But the educators movement is being fueled by powerful social forces. Besides new teachers strikes in states such as Santa Catarina and Paraná, there is growing discontent within the Brazilian population as a whole over government neglect of the pandemic, and a wave of unrest is spreading through different layers of the working class.

Working class strikes and protests spread throughout Brazil

Today, any drop of water threatens to overflow the dikes containing social opposition.

Last week's increase in fuel prices triggered wildcat strikes and protests by truck drivers, Uber drivers and app delivery workers in different regions of Brazil. On a number of occasions, protesters headed to oil refineries, agitating among the oil workers, who have called a strike against rising COVID-19 infections and threats to privatize their facilities.

Demonstrations also erupted among call center operators, who in March of last year initiated the first response of the Brazilian working class to the COVID-19 pandemic, raising the powerful cry: "We are not going to die in our cubicles!"

Demanding better wages, opposing the cancelling of their health plans and denouncing the negotiations between the company and the union, AlmaViva operators in Aracaju, Sergipe, held a protest last Monday. The workers shouted: "Strike, now! Strike, now!" The next day, a spontaneous protest against similar conditions took place at the Liq company in Salvador, Bahia. The social media group Senzala80, independently organized by the company's workers, declared: "This is called breach of contract. We signed a contract where we were given the right to a health plan, and in the middle of a pandemic we had our right to health care taken away. And the union does what for the operators? NOTHING."

Over the last year, there have been continuous strikes by bus drivers and fare collectors, who have suffered 70,000 layoffs since the beginning of the pandemic, and in many cases have had their salaries delayed for months. A bus drivers strike lasted a month in Teresina, the capital of Piauí; on Monday, a strike was started in Vitória, capital of Espírito Santo; next Monday a strike will begin in São Luís, capital of Maranhão. In many other cities the same situation is developing.

At the beginning of February, the National Confederation of Land Transport Workers, which includes more than 300 bus drivers unions, sent a letter to the federal government and the Congress demanding the financing of the country's transport companies. Expressing the unions' nervousness over the unrest within their ranks, the document declared: "We emphasize that the above measures are urgent and aim, in this first instance, to mitigate the growing GENERAL STRIKE movement stimulated (rightfully) by the local unions and federations." No local unions are demanding a general strike! But they fear they will prove unable to contain rank-and-file workers heading in this direction.

These concerns are shared by the entire ruling class. In the upper echelons of the state, a red alert was triggered last week by the eruption of massive demonstrations in Paraguay against the disastrous mismanagement of the pandemic by Bolsonaro's fascistic ally, President Mario Abdo Benítez. The threat that these protests will cross the border and "infect" the Brazilian masses, who face fundamentally the same catastrophe as their Paraguayan brothers and sisters, is not being underestimated within ruling circles.

A socialist program against the COVID-19 pandemic

So far, the response to the pandemic has been dictated by the capitalist class. Private profit interests have prevailed over the social interest of preserving lives. While hundreds of thousands have died from COVID-19 and millions more were thrown into unemployment and misery in Brazil, the parasitic capitalist oligarchy has immensely increased its share of the national income.

The same economic activities that provoked COVID-19 outbreaks among workers guaranteed obscene profits for capitalist corporations and their shareholders. The meatpacking companies, responsible for spread of the pandemic into the interior of Brazil and for the largest outbreaks in states like Rio Grande do Sul, which is now facing a total health care collapse, have had record profits in 2020.

Steel producer Usiminas had a 243 percent growth in profits in 2020, the highest in the last ten years. Meanwhile, the Steel Valley region, whose economy is dominated by the company, has recorded the second highest mortality rate in Minas Gerais and is on the verge of a health care collapse.

An end to the prolonged nightmare of the COVID-19 pandemic requires a political struggle of the working class against the capitalist system, organized independently of the corporatist unions and all the parties of the bourgeoisie.

The logic of development of the movement that is beginning to take shape in different sections of the Brazilian working class is towards the unification of these growing struggles into a general strike, one that closes down all non-essential economic activities, establishes workers control over the workplaces that continue to operate, and demands full income for all working families.

To do this, it is necessary to build rank-and-file committees in the different workplaces and neighborhoods, allowing workers to free themselves from the malign control of the unions over their movement. These committees must adopt a socialist program of expropriation of the large corporations and the fortunes of the capitalists, and for their redirection to meet social interests.

The Brazilian working class taking such independent action will have immediate international significance. Lives all over the world are at stake, as the new more deadly variants of the virus emerging in Brazil will inevitably cross national borders. A struggle waged by workers in Brazil, in turn, will be immediately answered by their brothers and sisters all over the planet.

The building of the Socialist Equality Group (GSI) in Brazil as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (CIQI), the only world political force that represents this internationalist socialist program, is the most fundamental step towards the victory of the working class.

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