

Amid health care collapse, Brazil cannot bury its COVID-19 dead

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The staggering growth of COVID-19 infections and deaths over the last month has turned Brazil into the global epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. Some day next week, South America's largest country is expected to reach the grim milestone of 300,000 deaths from the disease, 100,000 of which will have occurred in the first months of 2021.

The average number of daily infections in Brazil jumped from about 45,000 on February 18 to nearly 72,000 on March 18. On Friday, a record 90,570 new cases were registered. In the last four weeks, the number of Brazilians losing their lives every day to COVID-19 has doubled, and reached a record high on Tuesday with 2,841 new deaths.

While the Brazilian working masses wonder when this nightmare will end, recent developments in the pandemic indicate that the catastrophe in the country is far from having reached its peak.

This week, the public health research institution Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) warned that the “greatest health and hospital collapse in the history of Brazil” has already taken place. Updated data from Wednesday indicate that 26 of the 27 states in the country have reached 80 percent capacity of COVID ICU beds. In 19 capitals, it is over 90 percent.

Unable to receive adequate treatment, critically ill patients are dying waiting on lines that include thousands of people across the country. In Santa Catarina, a state at 97 percent occupancy of ICU beds and with more than 450 people on the waiting list, 130 patients have already died without receiving intensive care. The state's hospitals have adopted a “Protocol for allocation of scarce resources during the COVID-19 pandemic” with criteria to choose who will be given treatment and a chance to survive, and who will be left to die.

The crowding of health care facilities raises the imminent danger of widespread shortages of basic

medical supplies. Stocks of drugs needed for intubation, including anesthetics and muscle relaxants, are already in short supply in hospitals across the country. A report in the daily *Folha de São Paulo* pointed out that 22 ICU medications are already at their limit.

The Brazilian Ministry of Health recognizes that there is an “expectation of a dangerous shortage [of oxygen] in small hospitals within a few days,” as stated by General Ridauto Lúcio Fernandes, adviser to its Logistics Department in a public hearing in the Senate on Thursday. He added, “This is happening all over Brazil.”

Brazil is moving at a rapid pace toward the next stage of the COVID-19 catastrophe, which includes the widespread collapse of the mortuary system. Brazilian physician and neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis—who warned months ago that if a national lockdown were not undertaken immediately, “We will not be able to bury our dead”—pointed this week to indications that this sinister prognosis is already coming true.

On Wednesday, residents of Vitória de Santo Antão, a town in the interior state of Pernambuco, reported, with photographic evidence, that piles of decomposing bodies have been dumped in the open air in the local cemetery. Nicolelis commented about it on Twitter, “Funeral collapse usually starts like this. In small towns.” In an interview with UOL, the scientist described such a situation as a “risk of greater magnitudes, because we start talking about secondary bacterial infections, contamination of soil, water table, food.”

One of the main factors cited by researchers for the rise of cases in Brazil is the dispersion of the most transmissible variant of the coronavirus, originating in Manaus. Studies indicate that the P.1 variant can cause reinfection and be resistant to vaccines, threatening the national vaccination campaign, which has reached only 5 percent of the population with the first dose.

The generation of the Manaus variant, which is now

spreading across the planet and endangering the world's population, was the direct product of a ruling class experiment with the policy of "herd immunity."

After a terrible first wave of the pandemic, which provoked a health care and mortuary collapse in Manaus, the right-wing governor, Wilson Lima of the Christian Social Party (PSC), made a bet with the lives of the state's population by promoting the unrestricted reopening of economic activity, including schools. This experiment has been repeated throughout the entire country, which has been correctly defined as an open-air laboratory for the creation of more virulent variants of the coronavirus.

Even in the face of this catastrophic situation, Brazil's fascist president, Jair Bolsonaro, continues to pursue a "herd immunity" policy and the normalization of mass death. In a statement to the far-right press, he implied that reports of maximum capacity of COVID ICU beds throughout the country were false. He questioned: "How many are from COVID and how many are from other illnesses?"

However, the alternative to Bolsonaro's openly sociopathic policy presented by his so-called opponents within the Brazilian political establishment is, at best, a policy of criminal negligence.

A year ago, when not even 50 people had died from COVID-19 in Brazil, the governor of São Paulo, João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party, made a cynical criticism of Bolsonaro's indifference: "These are not fake deaths, Mr. President, and this is not a 'small flu' [as Bolsonaro described COVID-19]."

Since then, more than 66,000 deaths have occurred in the state of São Paulo, 659 of them on Thursday alone. Doria's so-called São Paulo Plan to combat the pandemic, based on an arbitrary system of color-coded restrictions, without any scientific basis, has proven a fiasco. Doria was the protagonist of a campaign for the unsafe reopening of the country's largest school system, which has killed dozens of educators and caused hundreds of outbreaks in schools since February.

One year ago, as Doria postured as a champion of science, the governors of the northeastern states ruled by the Workers Party (PT) and its allies in the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), created the scientific committee of the Northeast Consortium, inviting scientist Miguel Nicolelis to chair it.

Not only has Nicolelis resigned his presidency of the committee, revealing the chasm between the politics of

these governments and science, but this week he openly criticized the attitude of the Governors' Forum, presided over by Wellington Dias of the PT, in his interview with the UOL. He declared: "I am waiting. For two weeks now I have been hearing the governors say that they are going to organize themselves in that national committee [to implement a coordinated lockdown] that I have proposed since December. The scientific committee of the Northeast supported it. The 'small talk' continues."

Though these forces do not offer even remotely consistent policies to address the calamitous pandemic, Bolsonaro has made it clear that no measures to stop the circulation of the virus will be tolerated. On Thursday, the president filed a lawsuit before the Supreme Court (STF) to overturn decrees by governors imposing curfews in the states of Bahia, the Federal District and Rio Grande do Sul, declaring the measures unconstitutional.

Defending his court action, Bolsonaro underscored his fascist dictatorial threats, which go hand-in-hand with his genocidal policy in the face of the pandemic. If the court does not rule in his favor, he declared, the government will take the matter into its own hands. "Is the population prepared for a harsh social action by the federal government regarding this? What is harsh? It is to give freedom to the people. It is to give the people the right to work. No, this does not mean dictatorship." Yes, indeed, it means exactly that.

The coronavirus recognizes no national borders. An uncontrolled pandemic in Brazil means an uncontrolled pandemic around the world. The working class must answer these catastrophic conditions and the threats posed by the ruling class in every country through independent political action, stopping every nonessential economic activity, guaranteeing full income to every working family and fighting for a socialist internationalist program against the capitalist policies of death and dictatorship.



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