

COVID-19 cases surge in the Philippines

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4 April 2021

COVID-19 daily cases are surging in the Philippines as hospitals declare themselves overwhelmed. On April 2, the seven-day moving average daily case rate hit 9,021, more than twice the peak of 4,421 cases reached last year. Active cases are at a new record of 153,809 and the death toll is now 13,297. The numbers continue to rise. The Department of Health reported 11,028 new cases on Sunday.

So far, Metro Manila, the national capital region (NCR) and four surrounding provinces have borne the brunt of the surge with 70 percent of active cases or 109,496.

According to the Philippine health department, the COVID-19 allotted beds in 26 out of 150 hospitals in the NCR were already fully occupied. Twenty-four hospitals were at over 85 percent occupancy. Of the 804 intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients, over 78.61 percent or 631 were in use. In addition, 69 percent or 3,143 isolation beds and 61 percent or 2180 ward beds were also occupied.

Around the world, COVID-19 cases are surging as capitalist governments herd students and workers back into unsafe schools and workplaces in a drive to restore the full production of profits even as the pandemic continues and vaccination programs are stalled by vaccine nationalism and outright hoarding by richer countries.

In New York City, 76,471 more cases and 7,763 deaths were recorded in March alone as Mayor Bill de Blasio ordered 80,000 city workers back to offices. The fascist Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has continued to oppose even the minimal social distancing measures implemented by state and municipal governments as the 7-day moving average daily case rate is now a horrendous 73,993 cases.

Similarly, the government of President Rodrigo Duterte and the Philippine ruling elite have matched their international counterparts in cynicism, callousness

and malign neglect in ensuring capitalist profits take precedence over the health and lives of the working masses.

From the outset, the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic was essentially a militarized police operation aimed, not at halting viral transmission and eradicating the virus, but rather at suppressing social opposition. The government channelled desperately needed public funds, amounting to over \$US19 billion, to paying off the public debt and to quantitative easing measures instead of implementing mass testing, organizing effective contact tracing, providing financial assistance and paid leave to allow the working class to shelter in place, and beefing up public hospitals.

As a result, mass testing remained inadequate with positivity rates above 5 percent, indicating that the real extent of the transmission was never tracked. Contact tracing efforts were hobbled. International health organizations recommended that for every confirmed case a ratio of 30 contacts be traced but the Philippines attained, at best, a 1:7 ratio. An estimated 40 percent of asymptomatic cases are therefore thought not to have been counted and the real number of COVID-19 infected cases may actually be over 1 million instead of the official count of 756,000.

COVID-19 related deaths are likely severely undercounted. Even numbers reported by the government vary wildly. According to the Philippine Statistical Authority, registered deaths due to COVID-19 accounted for a total of 27,967 deaths or 4.9 percent of the total registered deaths in 2020. This is more than twice the 13,320 deaths with confirmed test results officially reported by the health department as having resulted from the virus.

The Philippines has been widely reported as having implemented the longest running lockdown in the world in response to Covid-19, but this is essentially

fraudulent. Workers in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries, export processing zones, banking, financing, and mining have all been exempted from the lockdowns and kept at work throughout the pandemic.

It has largely been business as usual as demonstrated by Google Mobility data for the Philippines, tracking mobile phone users in workplaces. It showed a drop of only 9 percent from January-February 2020. In the industrial area of Region 4 CALABARZON, the data revealed a mere 4 percent drop in work place traffic.

The present surge itself followed shortly after the government began to allow non-essential businesses to open up to 30 percent of their capacity in mid-February. Soon after, the count of daily cases began to increase from a 7-day average daily case rate of 1,675 to over 2,200 by the first week of March.

Nevertheless, the government economic managers doubled down on further opening the economy, in particular, the consumption side, insisting that the country or, to be more precise the ruling elites, could no longer afford lockdowns. The Joint Statement of the Duterte Administration's Economic Managers published on January 28 underlined this point.

“On the demand side, private consumption, which comprises some 70 percent of GDP, remained weak with a -7.2 percent growth... Economic growth will be hard pressed to make a stronger recovery if children and families are restricted from participating in the economy, as up to 50 percent of non-essential retail sales are driven by family spending.

“Consequently, our quarantine restrictions reduced household spending by 801 billion pesos in 2020 or an average of around 2.2 billion pesos per day. The fall in consumption translates into a total income loss of around 1.04 trillion pesos in 2020 or an average of around 2.8 billion pesos per day.”

In other words, if children and their parents need to be sacrificed for profits, so be it.

Confronted, however, with the sharply rising infection numbers and fearful of social anger in the working class, the government, on March 29, 2021, placed Metro Manila and four surrounding provinces back under its strictest militarized lockdowns. It imposed curfews and checkpoints on working-class and poor neighbourhoods and forbade mass gatherings while, like previous lockdowns, keeping workers at work in BPO industries, export processing zones,

banking, factories and offices.

The Philippine health care system is dominated by private hospitals. Geared towards medical tourism, in particular, and profits in general, the private hospitals have avoided pouring all available social resources into the fight against the pandemic. Only 20 percent of their bed capacity, the minimum mandated by the government, have been allocated for COVID-19 patients.

As Dr. Jaime Almora, the head of the Philippine Hospital Association, explained in an interview with GMA News, the hospitals are “overwhelmed” not for the lack of bed capacity but the lack of nurses because of the “phasing out of non-performing nursing schools, the K-12 program that resulted in no nursing graduates for a year, and the migration of nurses from private hospitals to the government due to bigger salaries.”

An estimated 30,000 nursing graduates have eschewed employment in the private hospitals, which underpay and overwork their staff, and have instead found work in the BPO industry where they are paid higher salaries.

With the fall of non-COVID-19 patients, the private hospitals have cut staff, citing delays in the government insurance reimbursement of their COVID-19 patient claims and, now with the surge, have demanded government-employed nurses be deployed to the private hospitals on a “voluntary” basis, that is, without additional pay from the private hospitals.



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