

COVID deaths rise among Brazil's Petrobras oil workers

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The uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil has had particularly catastrophic effects on the working class. While the capitalist class affirms, through the statements made by each company, that it “follows the protocols” and that workers get infected when they are off duty, the role of the workplaces as centers of transmission of the virus—and, consequently, as strategic places to fight the pandemic and defend the lives of the population—has become increasingly clear.

Similar to what has been seen in factories, transport and other workplaces, refineries and oil platforms have an infection rate above the national average. In the month in which Brazil surpassed the grim milestone of half a million COVID-19 deaths, the workers of the state-run energy giant Petrobras are seeing the deaths of their colleagues skyrocket.

According to monitoring by the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME), there was a 125 percent increase in Petrobras workers' deaths in the last two months, from 20 deaths as of April 5 to 45 deaths by June 15. A 27 percent increase in total infections among these workers was registered over this same period. So far, of the 46,416 direct workers at Petrobras, 7,205 (15.5 percent) have been infected with the virus, a proportion above the national average (approximately 8 percent).

This survey, however, does not even include outsourced workers, which in many Petrobras units correspond to half or even most of the workforce. The government's records also do not disclose information per production unit, which makes it difficult for workers to check and control this data. According to the accounting of the Unified Federation of Oil Workers (FUP), there are actually more than 80 workers who have died of COVID-19 at Petrobras since the beginning of the pandemic.

Even in the face of rising infection and death rates,

the company is preparing a return to on-site work for the approximately 20,000 employees of its administrative sector, who have been working remotely. The return is planned to happen gradually starting in July, coinciding with the peak of a third wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Brazil, according to leading scientists' projections.

In addition to the exposure of workers to infections and the lack of data on the real impact of the pandemic, Petrobras is being accused of promoting quack treatments for COVID-19, recommending drugs such as Ivermectin to its employees. The FUP says it has received reports from workers denouncing this practice and has lodged an official complaint through one of its local unions, the Sindipetro of Northern Rio de Janeiro, presenting as proof a prescription given to a worker.

The company denied having given this guidance, but in a press report it defended the “autonomy” of the doctors and did not condemn the prescription of the medicine, which, besides being ineffective for COVID-19, poses serious risks to those taking it. Doctors from COVID-19 treatment centers in São Paulo, such as the Clínicas and Emilio Ribas hospitals, warned about the side effects of drugs such as Ivermectin, which are jeopardizing the treatment of severely ill patients.

In March, the WHO had reiterated its recommendation “not to use Ivermectin for patients with COVID-19, regardless of the level of severity, or duration of symptoms.”

Despite all these warnings, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro encourages the use of Ivermectin, as well as Azithromycin and Hydroxychloroquine, all of which are ineffective against the virus. With propaganda that these drugs offer an “early treatment” to COVID-19, Bolsonaro is leading doctors and companies across the

country to adopt what he calls the “COVID kit.”

A *BBC News Brazil* report, published in March, reported that at least four companies have distributed the “COVID kit” to their employees in São Paulo, Paraná and Santa Catarina. The case of Petrobras, a global and government-run company, is even more grotesque and alarming.

In line with the Brazilian ruling class as a whole, Petrobras has tried to absolve itself of responsibility for the increase in infections and deaths and has blamed the workers themselves for getting sick. “Even with all the prevention protocols adopted in the units and recommendations for individual care regularly issued by the company, employees are subject to risks also during transportation, personal routines, time off or even in telecommuting,” the company declared.

Besides the risk of death from COVID-19 in Petrobras units, the privatization process of the state-owned company is worsening the conditions of workers. According to Sindipetro of São Paulo’s Coast, since 2019, 37,610 jobs have been ended at Petrobras and its subsidiaries, which include the dismissal of 14,311 of its own workers and 23,299 outsourced workers. The workforce cuts have meant longer work shifts, increasing the exposure of workers to infections and the risk of accidents.

In March, workers at Petrobras’s RLAM and Regap units went on strike in response to the sale of these refineries and the outbreaks of COVID-19 in the plants. In late May, workers at three Petrobras Biofuels (Pbio) units went on a two-week strike against the privatization.

Although these strikes developed in Petrobras units across the country, with stoppages and protests in several other units, they have been systematically divided and isolated by the trade unions, even as struggles against infections in the workplaces were developing in different sections of the working class, such as teachers and transport workers.

With the rise of an ominous third wave of the pandemic in Brazil, it is imperative that oil workers break this isolation. In opposition to the domination of the corporatist unions, they must form a network of rank-and-file committees at the Petrobras units and at each and every workplace, which will allow the coordination of the struggles across different sectors of the working class and internationally. Petrobras

workers should join in the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It has been established to coordinate workers struggles across state borders and continents and to arm these struggles with a socialist internationalist program.



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