

Brazilian authorities, media hide rise in respiratory illnesses in children to promote end of COVID-19 pandemic

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As the end of the 2021 school year in Brazil approaches, the campaign to return to classroom teaching is bringing more cases and deaths from COVID-19 among children.

With the spread of the more transmissible COVID-19 Gamma and Delta variants this year, there have been 1,245 COVID-19 deaths among 0-19 year olds as of September 18, with an unknown number since then amid a dramatic drop in testing as vaccinations advance among the adult population. This number of recorded deaths, which had already surpassed the total number of deaths in all of last year—1,203, precedes schools reopening with 100 percent occupancy and the mandatory face-to-face teaching ordered all across the country in the last two months.

A report by the public health agency Fiocruz, published last week, pointed out that despite the stability in the overall number of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) cases, the number is increasing among children aged 0 to 9 years old, with about 1,500 cases every week. With the insufficient number of COVID-19 tests in Brazil, the number of SARS cases has been used by Fiocruz as a proxy for the real situation of the pandemic in the country.

Although the cases of COVID-19 do not currently represent the majority of SARS cases, their increasing numbers, which can have multiple viral diseases as their cause, show how easily airborne viruses can spread in schools and expose the need for their immediate closure to prevent them from once again becoming centers of pandemic transmission.

Instead, amid record surges in Europe and warnings by Fiocruz that circulation of people is higher now than before the pandemic, the decrease in the number of hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19 in some regions of the country and the advances in vaccinations are being used by the government to justify “living with COVID-19.”

Since October, state and local governments have been pushing for compulsory in-person education to force parents to leave their children in schools and return to unsafe workplaces to secure corporate profits. At the same time, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, requirements for the use of masks in open environments were lifted, and the same was announced for São Paulo beginning December 11, as part of a propaganda campaign by authorities to convince the public that the virus is under control.

Such propaganda could not be further from the truth. Today, it is impossible to determine precisely the pandemic situation in Brazil.

The country ranks 128th in the world in tests per million inhabitants, next to war-torn countries like Iraq and Libya. With testing prioritizing symptomatic cases, the positivity rate is 27.54 percent, far above the 5 percent needed to monitor the transmission of the virus in the population. The official number of new COVID-19 cases has been decreasing, with 58,312 cases reported last week.

Even assuming that the official numbers are reliable, the attempts by the government and the corporate media to promote “living with” the coronavirus mean accepting over 1,000 deaths each week, with 1,365 confirmed deaths last week, in addition to tens of thousands more who will suffer the effects of Long COVID.

Last week, the state of Piauí reported 100 percent occupancy in ICUs, having maintained that rate for the last three months. Instead of reining in the virus, local authorities have announced efforts to expand its in-patient capacity regardless of the high fatality rate of the disease for people needing intensive care. In the city of Serrana, in the state of São Paulo, where the population over the age of 18 was completely immunized seven months ago as part of a study by the government-linked Butantan Institute, the number of cases tripled in October and continued to rise during November.

In the capital of the state of Bahia, Salvador, the city government announced the mandatory return to schools on November 17, following announcements by dozens of states, including those governed by the Workers Party (PT). The city government admitted difficulties in implementing the reopening in the face of strong opposition among parents. Many are refusing to send their children to crowded schools with only weeks left in the school year.

In a backhanded admission of the wide opposition to the return among parents and teachers, on November 7, Rio de Janeiro’s Municipal Secretary of Education Renan Ferreirinha Carneiro went to *Folha de São Paulo* to defend mandatory in-person classes. In calling for a quick return, Carneiro stated that “in the municipal school system alone, 25,000 students are neither interacting with the school remotely nor going in person.” This number corresponds to 5.5 percent of the students enrolled in the public network of the state capital.

As has been done internationally, Secretary Carneiro fraudulently portrays compulsory in-person education as a fight

against exclusion, covered up by lies that “schools have been adapting to the required sanitary and infrastructural conditions.” The exact opposite is true.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the measures implemented for remote learning were adjusted to the needs of big business interests, providing deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars to mobile phone companies and internet providers for mass education platforms. Meanwhile, millions of students without adequate internet access or digital equipment have been effectively excluded from remote learning.

As to the supposed “adaptations” made in schools, a glimpse of their complete inadequacy was provided by a report from the Paraná State Court of Audit from September, pointing out that 14.3 percent of schools had damaged, very small or awning windows. Such conditions exist in schools all over the country.

Parents and teachers are completely aware of this situation, despite the flood of government and media propaganda in favor of the spread of the virus, and have reported to the WWS the real conditions in their communities.

Fátima, a mother from the city of Nova Iguaçu in the state of Rio de Janeiro, participated in the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR) online meeting on November 2 titled “The need to close schools and the means to end the pandemic.” She reported on the state government’s efforts to dismantle any measures to control the spread of the virus.

She said, “Here in the region, the politicians say that there are no more hospitalized patients and that vaccination is up, and there are almost no more cases of COVID-19, but the reality is different. In every suspected COVID-19 case, the doctors give the medicine and say that it is sinusitis. Anyway, now we have sinusitis outbreaks, because in my mother’s house there were four people with the same symptoms. At my daughter’s school, the agglomeration continues. The pressure to go back has been enormous.”

Luís, also from Rio de Janeiro, is a teacher, who sent a report of the unsafe conditions at the school where he works to the CBES-BR meeting. He described the situation which families are being subjected to.

“[The end of the school year in] the state was a surreal mess. At the end of the day you still have students who haven’t returned due to pre-existing conditions, and students without internet delivering handouts, only now the classrooms are a little more full. Technically, classes will last until December 17, but I am already finishing up the activities of the attending students in order to be able to dedicate myself to the ones who haven’t returned, also thinking about emptying the school soon.”

Their worries are compounded by the long-term risks presented to children exposed to COVID-19, even if they are not as severely affected by the respiratory symptoms as adults and the elderly.

In an interview with the WWS, immunologist Dr. Anthony Leonardi, who co-authored a recent study on the impact of Long COVID, explained that molecules bound to the virus’s spike protein induce an excessive immune response, which results in damage to the body’s tissues and cells.

Long COVID has the potential of damaging any part of the body, with one of the biggest concerns being neurological damage. “The

immune system is responsible for going into all the tissues in the body, except for a few immune-privileged sites. But SARS-CoV-2 doesn’t respect the immune-privileged sites whatsoever. It brings T-cells into the brain. So, we can see the impact of the infection across every physiological system. Because if it distorts the immune system and the immune system is responsible for patrolling the body everywhere, then there are going to be problems everywhere.”

Endemic COVID-19 would bring terrible consequences: “For this virus to become endemic, we would see a lot of maimed people with autoimmunity. And with immune memory, that is not able to fully prevent mild and moderate infections again. In my opinion, the damage could be cumulative.”

Dr. Leonardi criticized efforts to hide the severity of COVID-19 in children, “There’s a terrible assumption that kids are okay with SARS-CoV-2 infection when there’s data coming out that they have lost out on a greater number of healthy years than adults,” he said. “And kids are more likely to be infected than adults and are more likely to be reinfected than adults.”

In their opposition to the mass infection of children and the continued exposure of the population to the deadly SARS-CoV-2, with horrific immediate and long-term consequences for millions, parents and teachers are not alone.

A growing strike movement is developing internationally against the capitalist policies towards the pandemic, which are provoking mass death and impoverishment.

In Brazil, throughout the year, there have been several strikes and protests by nurses, truckers, oil workers, app drivers and other sectors. In September, Jurong shipyard workers went on strike over the company’s refusal to pay wage increases, and last month, more than 4,000 General Motors workers in the ABC industrial region went on strike for two weeks, rejecting contract proposals made by the company and the union.

Education workers went on strike for months during the pandemic to oppose the return to schools to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Recently, there was a demonstration by thousands of municipal teachers in São Paulo against pension cuts.

In order to advance this international struggle against the “new normal” of mass infection, death, long-term incapacitation and poverty, the International Committee of the Fourth International has launched the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. It will analyze the origin and causes of the pandemic, indict those responsible for the deaths of more than 15 million people, and counter the homicidal policy of capitalist governments the world over with a campaign for eliminating the virus in all countries. The CBES-BR calls on all workers and scientists in Brazil to join this struggle and assist in the work of the inquest.



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