

# Infections rise in Brazil as Omicron spreads across the country

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7 January 2022

Despite a persistent blackout of epidemiological data in Brazil and deliberate underreporting of infections, indications of a new and explosive wave of COVID-19 in the country are unquestionable. The first week of 2022 was marked by growing reports of exponential increases in the numbers of infections and hospitalizations in different Brazilian states and cities.

On Friday, 63,292 infections were reported, a 77 percent increase over the previous day. This is now the highest daily number of new infections since July. A week earlier, the moving average of daily cases in the country was 7,238. Several states reported even more staggering increases.

In Rio Grande do Sul, in the far south of the country, the state government issued an alert on January 4 to all its 21 regions after an average of 75.9 cases per million inhabitants was recorded, multiplying by 13 the average from just a week earlier, of 5.7 cases per million inhabitants. The numbers continue to grow day by day, with 1,370 new cases reported on Monday; 2,138 on Tuesday; 3,464 on Wednesday; and 5,363 on Thursday.

In the neighboring state of Santa Catarina, COVID-19 infections increased by 560 percent between December 19 and January 1, according to its January 4 Epidemiological Bulletin. In that 10-day period, about 2,800 total cases were recorded. However, 2,700 infections were recorded in the state on a single day, Thursday.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, 6,551 new cases were registered in the first four days of the year alone, compared to 8,008 cases in the entire month of December. Besides this, the percentage of positive tests has grown alarmingly in the last few days, indicating an explosion of underreported infections. From 13 positive results per 100 tests performed in the last week of December, the number jumped to 41 per 100 this week.

Meanwhile, health care facilities throughout the country are once again being overwhelmed by the massive influx of COVID-19 and flu patients. *O Globo* reported that at least 10 Brazilian states are strained by the increase of COVID-19 infections.

The state of São Paulo indicated that the number of patients hospitalized with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) doubled from December to January. Public and private emergency care units in the capital have hours-long waiting lines, with some hospitals registering record numbers of patients. In the state of Pernambuco, requests for ICU beds for patients with respiratory syndromes increased 858 percent in the last two weeks. And in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais, public COVID-19 beds

have already reached full capacity.

Despite clear evidence of the ongoing viral catastrophe, a concrete assessment of the stage of development of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil is being seriously undermined by a scandalous blackout of the country's epidemiological data, which has persisted for more than a month.

After claiming to have fallen victim to hacker attacks on its digital platform in late November, the Ministry of Health of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro's administration has been unable to re-establish access to critical data for epidemiological analysis. The country's main epidemiological bulletin, *InfoGripe*, issued by the public health institution Fiocruz, has not been published for about a month due to lack of governmental data from the Epidemiological Surveillance System (SIVEP).

This ominous situation, which prevails due to the criminal negligence of the Bolsonaro administration, is being treated with indifference by the corporate media and the Brazilian political establishment as a whole. The only ones seriously raising their voices against this crime are the scientists and researchers engaged in monitoring and fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil.

On December 30, the coordinator of *InfoGripe*, Marcelo Gomes, denounced on his personal Twitter account the lack of data being provided by the Ministry of Health. He then questioned: "Which viruses are dominating in each location? Which are the most affected age groups? Has the increase intensified, remained slow, reversed? We don't know."

On Wednesday, the Rede Análise COVID-19 (COVID-19 Analysis Network), a multidisciplinary group of volunteer researchers on the pandemic in Brazil, made an appeal to its followers on Twitter, urging a mobilization on social media to "demand open COVID-19 data in Brazil, which have been off the air since the beginning of December 2021."

Epidemiologist Pedro Hallal tweeted, "Omicron bursting in Brazil and the official statistics don't show it. [Why]? Data blackout. Low testing. Which institution is responsible for taking care of the data and testing? The Ministry of Health, which is completely without direction."

Neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis tweeted: "Brazil is clearly facing a new wave of COVID-19 but [nobody] has the slightest idea of its real dimension [because it is not] tested, reliable data is not recorded and the media has taken the pandemic off the agenda. We live on sporadic reports and anecdotes. But it is clear that the third wave has arrived!"

As the new stage of the COVID-19 catastrophe unfolds in Brazil, Bolsonaro's corrupt and cowardly opponents in the bourgeois political system give the fascist president a free pass to continue committing the same crimes against humanity that were publicly exposed by the Senate's Commission of Inquiry on COVID-19 late last year.

Bolsonaro continues with impunity to spread pernicious lies about the virus and vaccines and to sabotage any measures to control the pandemic. At a press conference Wednesday outside the Vila Nova Star Hospital, after clarifying that his emergency admission for abdominal pain was caused by poorly chewed shrimp in his Sunday lunch, Bolsonaro urged a continuation of the "herd immunity" strategy in response to the new COVID-19 wave. "We live in a difficult moment of the pandemic," he stated, "with direct impact on the economy. With 'stay home and leave the economy for later,' inflation comes on top of that, fuel prices and so many other problems."

In previous weeks, Bolsonaro had devoted himself to publicly attacking the vaccination of children against COVID-19. He demanded the disclosure of the names of the technicians of the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa) who approved the distribution of the vaccine to 5- to 11-year-old children, making them targets for his violent far-right supporters, and declared that his 11-year-old daughter will not be vaccinated.

In order to support this vicious far-right campaign, Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga called a public hearing to allegedly "promote a debate with health experts" about the vaccination of children. The hearing, held on Tuesday, served to give national projection and authority to promoters of conspiracy theories, quack cures and attacks on scientific truth.

Among the speakers, put on equal footing with serious scientists, was the quack doctor Roberto Zeballos, accused of being part of the criminal "parallel ministry" that advised Bolsonaro on the dissemination of the anti-scientific COVID-19 "early treatment" with drugs such as hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin. At Tuesday's hearing, Zeballos made a repulsive defense of the infection of children by SARS-CoV-2 and characterized the Omicron variant as a blessing from the skies. He declared, "We have an outbreak of Omicron that has showed itself as a strain that seems like it came from God, because there are already studies showing that it generates immunity against even the Delta strain." Such a figure should be jailed as a menace to the health and lives of the public and not put on national television.

The so-called "opposition" parties of the bourgeois establishment not only fail to dispute the "herd immunity" campaign openly promoted by Bolsonaro. They are maintaining, in the states which they rule, all the conditions for the free spread of the Omicron variant among the population.

At another press conference on Wednesday, São Paulo Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and his health advisers argued that despite the glaring increase in hospital admissions, "there is no need for new restrictive measures." The state health secretary, Jean Gorinchteyn, blamed the increase in cases on "people" who "took their masks off very abruptly, especially in social gatherings, in social environments, thus favoring transmission."

In Rio de Janeiro, Mayor Eduardo Paes of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) canceled the street carnival block parties, which were to take place in February, but maintained the mega-event of the Sapucaí samba schools parade, claiming it was easier to control people's entrance. At the same time, Rio de Janeiro's City Hall, as well as São Paulo's, are demanding the reduction of the isolation time of people infected with COVID-19 to five days, following the criminal model of the American CDC.

In Bahia, which in recent weeks has suffered from devastating floods that have displaced tens of thousands of people, leaving them extremely vulnerable to coronavirus infection, the state government of Rui Costa, of the Workers Party (PT), decided this week to maintain the authorization of entertainment events with up to 5,000 people.

At a national level, the PT, as well as its pseudo-leftist satellite, the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), remain silent about the new rise of the pandemic. The PT's national president, Gleisi Hoffmann, limited herself to tweeting: "I know it is difficult, but let's take care of ourselves, wear masks, avoid crowds, and take the vaccines."

Repeating the same language, the Central Workers Union federation (CUT) declared in response to the global surge of infections: "precautions are still valid!" But how can the working class take "precautions" against an airborne virus when it is forced to remain crowded in poorly ventilated workplaces, while their children stay in crowded, often windowless classrooms?

COVID-19 outbreaks have been reported this week at major television stations, with at least 144 workers infected at *Rede Globo* and more than 80 at *Rede Record*. Infections in factories, meat packing plants, oil rigs and other workplaces where the virus spreads with extreme speed are not being reported but are certainly taking place on a massive scale. This catastrophic course needs to be stopped immediately!

The technical and scientific resources to stop the deadly COVID-19 pandemic exist. The question to be resolved is of a political character. The working class needs to mobilize itself independently of the bourgeois political parties and the corporatist unions that support the conditions imposed by the capitalism based on the priority of private profits over saving lives.

Organize with your work colleagues, form rank-and-file committees and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees! Contribute to the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic! To learn more, contact the Socialist Equality Group (Brazil) right now.



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