

With world's highest COVID-19 death rate, Peru confronts third wave of pandemic

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11 January 2022

With the spread of the Omicron variant out of control, the continuation of the pro-big business policies of his predecessors by President Pedro Castillo has left Peru open to a devastating third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Peru has now recorded more than 70,000 new cases in a single week, surpassing the peaks set in the deadly first and second waves of the pandemic, which claimed over 200,000 lives, inflicting the highest death rate of any country in the world.

With a population of 33.6 million people, Peru has recorded 2,358,685 cases and 203,019 deaths. This represents 6,030 deaths per million inhabitants, as compared to 2,575 per million in the United States, which has the largest number of deaths in absolute terms.

The tragic death toll has also resulted in Peru being the country with the largest number of children orphaned by the pandemic, nearly 100,000.

Peru's Deputy Health Minister Augusto Tarazona told RPP News that with the current uncontrolled spread of the virus, within three weeks the country will face some 150,000 new cases per week which "will put us in a very difficult situation." Stating the obvious, he added, "Having in a few days hundreds of thousands of cases will definitely negatively affect the health services."

During the first half of December, the country was recording just 12,000 new cases a week. "It isn't a curve, it's a straight vertical line heading up," the Peruvian health official warned.

The Peruvian Health Ministry announced on December 19 that it had detected four cases of Omicron in the country. Now the variant accounts for 82 percent of the new infections in Lima.

While the first cases were detected in upper class and

upper middle class districts such as Miraflores, San Isidro and La Molina, indicating their likely origin among Peruvians traveling abroad, the variant quickly spread to the impoverished and working class districts, including those populated with migrants from the interior of the country, such as San Martin de Porres and San Juan de Lurigancho, and onward into the country's provinces.

The government of President Castillo has pursued a vaccination-only strategy, failing to implement any contact tracing program.

Peru has one of the highest vaccination rates in Latin America—87 percent for those over 69, and 80 percent for the adult population as a whole with two doses. This is due in part to government mandates of vaccinations for entering workplaces or public enclosed spaces but even more so to the demand for vaccines from a population that went through the horrific toll of death and disease during the first waves of the pandemic.

Castillo, whose accession to the presidency last July was hailed by the pseudo-left as a victory for the Peruvian working class and a revival of the Latin American "Pink Tide," has categorically rejected any serious lockdowns or any other measures that would impinge on the profits of the transnational mining companies and other capitalist interests, both foreign and domestic.

Restrictions that have been put in place will do little to nothing to blunt the rise in infections. A night-time curfew has been extended in Lima, Callao and 23 provinces that have been declared on a state of "high alert" to 11:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m., while in the rest of the country it is in effect from 2:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. It has also limited occupancy of commercial spaces to 40 percent in those areas deemed under a state of high alert.

In essence, Peru is following the lead of the United States and other major capitalist countries in promoting the policy of “learning to live with COVID,” i.e., an acceptance of unending mass death and sickness.

The spread of Omicron, however, threatens Peru’s precarious health care system with imminent collapse. In Lima, the occupation rate for intensive care unit beds had risen to 75 percent as of January 5. In the north of the country, in regions like Piura and La Libertad, the rate is rising above 80 and 90 percent.

Carlos Lescano, president the Peruvian Society of Intensive Medicine (Sopemi), told *El Comercio* that the country needs at least 3,500 intensive care beds to confront the coming wave of serious cases. This is more than double what is now available. He warned that, as in the first and second waves, patients would die for lack of treatment.

Even with more beds, he added, there is a serious lack of trained medical personnel. According to WHO standards, Peru should have between 2,500 and 3,200 intensive care specialists. Today there are only 750 in the country.

Dr. Edén Galán-Rodas, ex-secretary of the Medical College of Peru (CMP), told *El Comercio* that Peru needs a total of at least 15,000 more doctors to adequately care for its population. He noted that the Health Ministry under the Castillo administration had recently renewed contracts for 10,000 doctors that had expired on December 31 only until April. “The same errors are being made as in the first and second waves,” he said.

The Castillo government, the doctor said, has failed to provide medical personnel with adequate personal protective equipment, much less confront the deep underlying crisis of Peru’s health care system.

The Castillo administration has embraced the consensus position of all the bourgeois parties and the media that no economic activity will be interrupted to stem the spread of COVID-19 and that schools will be reopened in March, regardless of the state of the pandemic.

The renewed COVID-19 crisis has once again brought into stark relief the contradiction between Castillo’s populist promises to rule in the interests of Peru’s impoverished masses and his declarations of allegiance to the profit interests of foreign and domestic capital. In all of his government’s policy decisions

relating to the pandemic, the latter has prevailed.



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