

Amid record infections, Argentina's Peronist President scraps measures to contain COVID

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Argentina is experiencing its largest outbreak of COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, driven by the spread of the new Omicron variant. On Friday, January 14, the country set a record of 139,853 infections in a single day. This number is more than three times higher than the previous wave's record of 41,080 cases, registered in May 2020.

Until December, the average number of daily cases in Argentina was less than 2,000. In the period between January 6 and 12, the country recorded a total of 749,022 new infections, more than double the previous week with 359,456 infections. A week ago, the test positivity rate was 66 percent, indicating a high level of underreporting.

In the province of Buenos Aires, which has accounted for 40 percent of the country's total daily cases, hospitals are admitting an unprecedented number of new patients. The health care system is on the verge of collapse, with 20 to 25 percent of hospital staff sent home during the past week with coronavirus infections.

In response to the ominous situation, the Peronist government of President Alberto Fernández is relaxing measures to control the pandemic. Health minister Carla Vizzotti and the media are promoting the narrative that the new variant is "mild," following the campaign of the ruling classes around the world to justify keeping the economy open during the global COVID-19 outbreak.

This nefarious campaign is being promoted in unity with the Argentine right wing that Fernández feigns to oppose. Last Thursday, the former health minister in Mauricio Macri's reactionary administration, Adolfo Rubinstein, was invited by *La Nación* to advocate for the same idea of a "mild" Omicron. On the same day, 128,402 new cases were registered in Argentina, part of the unprecedented escalation of infections in the

country.

Expressing the indifference of the ruling class to the infection and death of millions of people, Rubinstein pointed out that "three out of every four [COVID-19] hospitalizations are of non-vaccinated people, or people with incomplete vaccination schemes." He concluded, "Eventually, all people will be vaccinated, or they will be infected." This statement summarizes the policies being adopted by the Peronist government.

At the end of last year, when the country was already facing a vertical growth of the infection curve, Fernández declared to the press that he would not make any change in coronavirus restrictions. He stated: "We have extended the health emergency, but we will not implement new measures." Following the measures implemented by the American CDC, Argentina immediately announced the revision of the quarantine time for people infected with COVID-19, which was reduced from ten to seven days.

On January 10, Vizzotti stated in an interview that "the increase in the number of infections is not being accompanied by an increase in hospitalizations, given the widespread vaccination of the population." This irresponsible statement, with the objective of disorienting and breaking the population's awareness, clashes with reality. The explosion of ICU admissions taking place in Europe and the United States today is a picture of what the coming weeks will be like in Argentina and Latin America as a whole.

Vizzotti also declared that she would meet with "experts" during the week to decide on the withdrawal of the quarantine requirement for people who have come into direct contact with infected people, and that one of the criteria for the decision will be its economic impact. The minister explained the central importance of maintaining economic activities for the Fernandez

administration, referring to the industrial region of Cordoba where employers are advocating that they only perform tests at the factory doors, excluding any kind of quarantine.

Serving the murderous capitalist interests, the Peronist government announced the end of quarantine for vaccinated people who entered in direct contact with infected individuals, limiting testing to the ones “with incomplete vaccination scheme (a single dose).” Currently, 74.1 percent of the population is vaccinated with two doses, or nearly 90 percent of adults, and only 17.3 percent have received a booster shot. With Omicron highly transmittable among vaccinated people, this means that millions of workers will be forced to frequent workplaces where people have tested positive, ensuring that warehouses, factories, shopping malls, schools, and other places become centers for the spread of the super infectious variant.

The new measure adopted by Fernández’s government is not based on any scientific analysis of Omicron. Many experts have already warned about the promotion of the fraudulent idea of a “mild” Omicron, and even with the low number of tests, the government itself is forced to admit the mass infection in the face of record cases. The massive number of infections taking place will be enough to cause an unprecedented increase in hospitalizations in the coming weeks and push the health care system over the edge.

The policy of “herd immunity” being adopted in practice by the Argentine government aims to ensure that workers continue to provide profits for large corporations, regardless of the massive deaths that it will cause. Similar policies are being implemented by governments throughout Latin America, which is experiencing the worst outbreak of infections since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to AFP, between January 7 and 13 the region had a record average of 300,000 daily cases, more than double the number reported during the previous wave.

Peru, the country with the highest per capita death rate in the world, set a record of daily cases on Saturday, with 49,745 new infections—almost four times higher than the previous record of April 2021. The government of Pedro Castillo, proclaimed, alongside Fernández in Argentina as representative of a new wave of the “Pink Tide” in Latin America, responded to the situation with indifference. Health Minister Hernando

Cevallos pointed out that the increase in deaths, from 30 to 60 compared to the previous day, showed that “lethality has not been substantially modified” with the Omicron variant, and announced that he would decrease the isolation time for asymptomatic people.

Bolivia is also experiencing an overwhelming explosion of COVID-19 infections. The country began December with an average of about 1,000 cases a day and has already surpassed the average of 11,000, with 14,461 cases reported last Saturday. Jeyson Auza, the health minister of the administration of Luis Arce of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), limited himself to pointing out that people being hospitalized or dying “are those who did not get vaccinated.”

Whether in the governments openly promoting the “herd immunity” strategy, like that of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or in countries ruled by the bourgeois parties fraudulently posing as “left,” the policies in response to the pandemic put the interests of the capitalist oligarchy above saving the lives of the working class.

In opposition to the policies of capitalist governments, it is necessary to implement all available public health measures to eliminate the coronavirus across the globe, including temporary lockdowns, testing and contact tracing, vaccination, distribution of high-quality masks, and travel control. Implementing this policy requires the development in Argentina and throughout Latin America of a truly socialist leadership in the working class, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).



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