

With new COVID-19 outbreak in Latin America, governments let virus rip

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After a brief period of decrease in new COVID-19 cases since the devastating wave of the Omicron variant, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil are again recording new outbreaks of the pandemic. Chile has recorded 18,060 and 26,780 new cases in the past two weeks, respectively, a 48 percent increase in one week. Although the number of ICU beds occupied by COVID-19 patients in Chile has not yet increased, the other waves of the pandemic have shown that hospitalizations and deaths follow case outbreaks with a delay of a few weeks.

In Argentina, cases increased by 92 percent in one week, and in the capital, Buenos Aires, by 128 percent. Four weeks ago, the country recorded 8,387 new cases, but that number rose to 33,989 last week, an increase of 305.2 percent. Between the first week of the month and last week, the number of patients hospitalized in moderate to severe condition in Buenos Aires increased 64.5 percent, from 237 to 390.

In Brazil, the moving average of cases is registering an increase, driven by outbreaks in the southern region of the country. On May 19, it reached an average of 19,128 daily new cases, a 46.7 percent increase over the previous month. Given the large under-reporting of the infections in the country, it is difficult to know the real trajectory of the pandemic. However, data from hospitalizations, pharmacy tests, and school reports indicate that the virus is spreading much faster than the official figures show.

According to data from the Brazilian Association of Pharmacy and Drugstore Chains (Abrafarma), the number of positive tests increased 56 percent between the week of May 2-8 and the week of May 9-15. In the same period, the total number of tests performed increased from 89,236 to 121,272.

The number of hospitalizations in the state of São Paulo is growing, from 1,253 in the first week of this month to 1,666 last week, an increase of 33 percent. At the same time, the total number of patients in ICU beds has increased 11.2 percent since May 1, from 3,179 to 3,536 on May 20.

Last week, classes were suspended in at least four classrooms at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) after 17 medical students tested positive for COVID-19 in just seven days. In the ABC industrial region of São Paulo, several reports are coming in from parents about infection outbreaks in schools. The mother of a student at the vocational school ETEC

Jorge Street told *Repórter Diário*: "As far as we know, there were 12 cases in his classroom. And also, in other classrooms of the mechatronics, electronics, and administration courses, there are teachers who are out sick."

The response to the signs of a new wave of the pandemic by Latin American governments is essentially the same, from self-declared "left-wing" governments such as that of Gabriel Boric in Chile and Alberto Fernández in Argentina, to that of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

The surge of infections in Chile is occurring at the same time as COVID-19 testing has reached its lowest rate in more than a year and a half. Tests for entering the country have not been required since March, and, in April, land borders with Argentina, Bolivia and Peru were reopened. On April 14, the Chilean government removed mask mandates in open places, including mass gatherings such as concerts and soccer stadiums.

Boric's government is adopting a pandemic severity warning criterion based solely on the transmission of "new variants" among the population. In March, with the emergence of the BA.2 subvariant, experts said that this version of the virus has sufficient mutations from the original Omicron variant to give it a new Greek letter. However, admitting the severity of BA.2 would cause alarm in the population and force the government to halt its campaign for ending the remaining mitigation measures. Following the position that "the cure cannot be worse than the disease," the criteria adopted by the Chilean government allows it to keep the economy open indefinitely during a next wave.

This indifferent and criminal policy in response to the pandemic is one component of the reactionary response of the Chilean pseudo-leftist government to intensifying workers' struggles, with Boric having sent the Carabineros special forces to violently suppress a strike by oil refinery workers on May 9. The aim is to ensure that workers remain on production lines, in warehouses, and other workplaces generating profits for the capitalists even as the prices of basic products continue to rise, and the spread of the virus continues to hit thousands of people every day.

As of April 6, continuing the policy adopted during the January-February Omicron wave, Alberto Fernandez's Peronist

government in Argentina removed the mandatory wearing of masks in schools and workplaces in Buenos Aires province, where more than a third of the country's population lives. The end of mandatory use was implemented a few days after the nationwide suspension of the obligation to report positive self-tests to the government and mandatory two-meter social distancing.

In response to the rapid increase in new cases in recent weeks, Argentine Health Minister Carla Vizzotti signaled over the weekend that the new outbreaks will not be met with any public health measures, which are already almost exclusively limited to vaccination. Vizzotti stated, "We begin today in Argentina the fourth wave of COVID-19, in a totally different situation," adding that the increase in cases has not had a corresponding strain on the Argentine health system because of vaccines.

In late March, Vizzotti declared that "we are in the transition from pandemic to endemic," almost at the same time as the Bolsonaro government declared the end of the health emergency in response to COVID-19 in Brazil, called ESPIN. The end of ESPIN was announced in April by Brazilian Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga, in the face of criticism from several public health and health professional associations. The decision officially went into effect on Sunday, as the number of hospitalizations accelerates.

Although Queiroga points out that the emergency purchase of vaccines and medicines will continue, experts are warning that the end of the decree could mean an even deeper cut in pandemic testing and surveillance systems. Fiocruz Foundation epidemiologist Ethel Maciel pointed out that deadlines for contracting services and personnel are put in limbo with the end of ESPIN. Maciel said: "Services will be discontinued. Professionals who are hired via decree will have their contracts terminated and this will be quite detrimental to the population."

The policy of letting the virus spread through the population in the most populous countries in the region threatens to cause a new devastating wave of cases throughout Latin America and creates the conditions for a new collapse of its health care systems, as during previous waves.

In Colombia, which has not yet registered an increase in new cases, Health Minister Fernando Ruíz pointed on May 14 to the "clear probability of negative and highly contagious events in the coming days" and made reference to the serious increase in infections in the US. However, following the line of all governments in the region, Ruíz ruled out any response to the threat of new waves, saying that a "slight increase in [the] positivity [rate] is not worrisome."

In Bolivia, the health minister of Luis Arce's pseudo-left government stated, "In the last epidemiological surveillance report we detected the BA.2 variant of Omicron in the country." The health ministry stated that an increase in cases had been recorded and that the population should prepare for a

new wave. Last week, 718 new cases were reported, more than double the previous week with 331 cases.

In addition, the vaccination-only strategy adopted by governments in the region allows the virus to continue spreading and developing new, potentially more transmissible, and virulent variants.

Earlier this month, the first cases of the XQ subvariant of COVID-19 were confirmed, a combination of the BA.1.1 and BA.2. In March, cases emerged of the so-called "Deltacron," a recombinant version of the Delta and Omicron variants. The emergence of new, more transmissible and aggressive variants points to the risk of versions with greater vaccine escape, transmissibility, and virulence than previous versions. A study by American experts and researchers published this month showed that the Omicron variant was as aggressive as previous strains. The work exposes the false narrative that was propagated in the corporate media and by governments over months that Omicron was "mild."

At the same time, the indifferent and criminal response of governments to public health issues is being exposed by their attitude toward monkeypox cases on several continents. The WHO has held emergency meetings in response to the disease, which has possibly been spreading for some time without being detected. On May 22, the first case of monkeypox was reported in Buenos Aires.

A global response to the new outbreaks of COVID-19 is needed, using all necessary public health measures, including distribution of high-quality masks, universal vaccination, travel control, temporary lockdowns, testing, and contact tracing, which will eliminate the virus in increasingly large regions of the world.

Organizing and implementing these measures can only be done by the international working class, with the assistance of public health experts and researchers. Rank-and-file committees in every workplace must be organized by workers in Chile, Argentina, Brazil and all of Latin America to fight for an end to the pandemic.



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