

# Peru lifts safety measures against COVID

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Peru's Ministry of Health (Minsa) recently announced that the mask mandate implemented at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic is ending. This was confirmed in detail by the government on September 29 in Supreme Decree 118-2022-PCM.

The decree provides that masking will only be mandatory in health establishments, on public ground transport, in closed places without ventilation, and for individuals presenting symptoms of COVID-19 infection.

COVID-19 vaccination cards will no longer be required for entry to shopping centers, markets, supermarkets, sports associations, entertainment venues (discotheques, *salsódromos*, pubs and the like), concerts, theaters, cinemas, gyms, churches, restaurants and similar crowded areas.

In treating the virus as “under control,” Minsa is bowing to the dictates of Peru's bourgeoisie and foreign investors that Peru's working class and rural masses must learn to “live with the virus” so profits can be assured.

Minsa's flimsy justifications for these abrupt policy reversals consisted of a slight decrease in infections and deaths in September, and an increase in COVID vaccination numbers. According to Minsa, the number of people inoculated with at least one dose has reached 29,859,497, or 89 percent of the population, and those with two doses 28,203,284, or 84 percent.

But the number of citizens with three doses is significantly lower, 20,647,039, or only 62 percent. Meanwhile, less than 15 percent of the population in Peru, under five million, have received a fourth dose, which is widely advocated by the world scientific community for vulnerable people.

Especially given the high rate of reinfection, the government is gambling with the lives of millions, particularly as to those who are unvaccinated or have received only one or two doses.

Camila Gianella Malca, a public policy researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in Lima, told *Bloomberg* earlier in September, “Despite lockdowns, many Peruvians continued to venture out to shop and to work, and so transmission [has] remained stubbornly high.”

Dr. Malca's statement justifies fears of the worst from the new pandemic policies. The suppression of mask use and social distancing means that airborne transmission of the virus will find a breeding ground in stadiums, discotheques and restaurants where hundreds of thousands will be exposed to COVID-19.

The lifting of the minimum distancing measure is particularly pernicious. It endangers the lives of millions of civil construction workers, factory workers, miners and public employees forced to work in close proximity. Construction workers are already condemned to work for low wages and no benefits under the most precarious working conditions and in lower quality jobs.

If anything, recently released public information about the ravages of the pandemic is alarming, not comforting.

On July 20, the first case of a new variant of Omicron BA.5, nicknamed Centauro, BA.2.75, appeared in Peru. *Infobae* reported that Peru was one of “the first to develop [this] new variant known by many as the ‘son’ of Omicron.”

Peru's Minister of Health Jorge López said that “many doubts are being raised regarding this new Omicron mutation ... [L]ocated in India, it represents at least 23 percent of the sequenced infections in India and grows at a rate of 17 percent per day faster than the rest of the variants of the BA.2 lineage.” In other words, BA.2.75 is highly transmissible.

Moreover, BA.2.75 is already of worldwide concern. On September 22, *Infobae* reported that “The ‘Centaur’ subvariant of COVID-19 arrived in Mexico.

... This new strain has been identified in more than 20 countries and is believed to be five times more contagious than previous variants.'

When the first case of BA.2.75 was detected in Peru, the president of the Public Health Committee of the Peruvian Medical Association (CMP), Cesar Portella, warned about the high risk of contagion from the new variant: "People with this Centaurus subvariant can become infected two or three times; vaccination does not prevent infection. There are people in other countries who are infected two, three or even four times, even if they are vaccinated."

In July, Carlos Padilla, a molecular biologist at the Peruvian National Health Institute (INS), told Agencia Andina, "The SARS-CoV-2 virus is constantly changing, which is why it is important to carry out regular genomic surveillance. If the virus is mutating locally, then we need to determine what its mutations are and what characteristics it is acquiring over time."

The pandemic is far from defeated. It continues to resurface with new mutations, which, as occurred in Peru with the June-August escalation of deaths, are likely to be more contagious and even more deadly.

The sudden elimination of almost all safety measures against COVID is nothing less than a criminal act by the government of President Pedro Castillo, designed to meet the demands of national businessmen, who face the threat of economic collapse, and foreign investors seeking to reap super-profits off Peru's mineral wealth.

The Peruvian ruling class most of all fears a popular uprising from below. Urban and rural workers and peasants already struggle with skyrocketing food, gasoline and public transportation prices. The Peruvian masses have displayed their will to resist further oppression through a series of protests, demonstrations and strikes.

The increase of positive cases and death due to lifting the safety measures against COVID can only pour fuel onto these flames.



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