

Lula government ends daily COVID-19 tracking in Brazil

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26 February 2023

Facing the clear threat of a worsening pandemic in Brazil, driven by the Omicron XBB.1.5 subvariant, the Workers Party (PT) government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has signaled its intention to declare the pandemic over and get the Brazilian population used to “living” with the coronavirus.

On February 16, the Health Ministry announced that it will start releasing COVID-19 data of cases, deaths and vaccination rates weekly and no longer daily, starting March 3. Trying to justify what in practice means a further departure from monitoring the pandemic in the country, the Health Ministry’s director of immunization, Eder Gatti, stated that only nine of the 27 Brazilian states update the data daily, which supposedly does not “allow an epidemiological analysis.” Still, he claimed, “We are not restricting data. ... What we want here is to facilitate the work with the data and send weekly data that is more accurate.”

This claim is patently false. If the Lula government had a genuine concern about the pandemic, the least it could do is coordinate a national effort and assist the states in implementing a system to monitor the pandemic on a daily basis, with a mass testing program, genetic sequencing of the variants in circulation, among other measures completely ignored by the “herd immunity” policy of the former fascist President Jair Bolsonaro.

However, almost two months after taking office, the Lula government has not reversed the Bolsonaro government’s measures to prioritize corporate interests over human lives, including its ending of the National Public Health Emergency due to COVID-19 as early as April 2022. The Lula government has also failed to implement awareness campaigns about the airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the importance of wearing quality masks and distributing them for free, as well as other basic public health measures that would have an almost immediate impact and could prevent cases and deaths.

The Brazilian bourgeois media has aided the Lula government in its effort to hide the pandemic. In a move that

set the stage for the Lula government’s decision to begin limiting the release of COVID-19 data to a weekly basis, in late January, Brazil’s major dailies ended their joint daily pandemic tracking system, launched in June 2020 when the Bolsonaro government attempted to censor COVID-19 data in Brazil.

Throughout February, the news about the pandemic in Brazil and around the world virtually disappeared from the Brazilian media, especially with the approach of Carnival, which became the focus of the news in recent weeks and was deliberately seized upon by the Lula government to announce the change in the release of pandemic data in Brazil. In fact, two of the most important Brazilian newspapers, *Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha de S. Paulo*, did not even report this change by the Health Ministry.

Later, the Lula government took a step further in its attempt to cover up the pandemic in Brazil. On February 17, Health Minister Nísia Trindade released a video saying, as if the pandemic was over, that “finally, the time has come for us to celebrate the biggest popular party in our country.” This statement on the eve of Carnival, when the service and tourism sectors in Brazil reap billions in profits, also expressed the Lula government’s intention not to put any restrictions on the economy, even with the worsening of the pandemic.

The Brazilian Carnival threatens to become a new superspreader event for the coronavirus and drive another wave in Brazil. This situation may be further aggravated by the spread of the Omicron XBB.1.5 subvariant, which is more transmissible and more vaccine-resistant. It was first detected in São Paulo in early January, and a month later XBB.1.5 was responsible for 80 percent of the cases in the state.

Parroting the anti-scientific claim advanced by the world’s capitalist elite that vaccination alone is enough to control a disease as infectious as COVID-19, Trindade also said in the video, “our great ally [right now] is vaccination. The more people with full vaccination, the more we will be protected in the face of the severe forms of the disease.”

Although vaccines protect against severe COVID-19, they do not prevent people from getting infected and suffering all its effects, particularly Long COVID. Considering this, the Lula government's health minister is saying to the population that it can ignore all the other tools that science has used for decades to fight infectious diseases, such as social distancing and the use of masks, and take the risk of getting infected and suffering all the consequences.

This, in fact, has been put in place since the PT's election victory, with the habit of Trindade and government officials—including Lula himself, who is 77 years old and has already tested positive for COVID-19—of attending closed and crowded events without wearing masks. After the wearing of masks, as well as the tracking of the pandemic, were relentlessly targeted by the “herd immunity” policy of Bolsonaro government—policies which the PT supposedly “fought”—this bad example leaves society totally unprepared for the risk of a new outbreak, which now threatens Brazil.

Since the beginning of February, there has been a reversal in the drop of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Brazil after a wave driven by the Omicron BQ.1 subvariant last year. On February 22, Isaac Schrarstzhaupt, the coordinator of the COVID-19 Network, one of the few initiatives still tracking the pandemic in Brazil, confirmed this trend, drawing particular attention to the increase in the occupancy of nursing beds in São Paulo from 750 on February 7 to 1,050 on February 21. Nationally, only the Southern region is not registering a worsening of the pandemic. In the Northern region, the state of Amazonas registered a 546 percent increase in hospitalizations and a 1,200 percent increase in cases in the first 15 days of February.

Data from the last few days further confirms this trend. After the failure to release COVID-19 data between February 18 and 21, due to Carnival, on Wednesday, Brazil registered 453 deaths and 11,616 cases, while on Thursday 334 deaths and 9,646 cases were recorded. Due to massive under-reporting, the average number of cases between February 11 and 17 decreased from 8,192 to 3,544 between February 18 and 23, while the average number of deaths increased from 55 to 131 in the same period.

In contrast to the position of the Lula government's health minister, leading neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis has issued a series of warnings on Twitter in recent days. “The pandemic has been totally removed from the agenda and political speeches,” he wrote last Thursday. “Two days before the beginning of Carnival, which promises to have the largest crowds in decades, there is no official communication from the MH [Ministry of Health] to alert the population about the spread of new Omicron variants! No strategy to break transmission, other than vaccines, announced.”

On Monday, Nicolelis added: “The MH [Ministry of Health] should not join the negligence and lack of health responsibility of states that fail to publish daily COVID-19 data. It should instead determine that this data be made available daily. This conduct is shameful and extremely disappointing.”

Although Bolsonaro represents the most vicious expression of “herd immunity,” recent events expose the PT's embrace of this homicidal policy. This, however, had already been made clear in previous waves of the pandemic in Brazil. In the second deadly wave, in 2021, Nicolelis, himself a longtime PT supporter, left the scientific committee of the Northeastern states in the face of inaction by the region's governors, including four of them from the PT.

Then, during the peak of the Omicron BA.1 subvariant wave early last year, Nicolelis again denounced the PT's policy, saying in an interview with the WSWs: “the PT governors, who I know very well because I worked with them, stopped doing what had to be done a long time ago. So, who are the progressives in this story? I have seen conduct by so-called progressive people that was very similar to Bolsonaro's. They just had the varnish and the stamp of progressives.” The same thing could now be said of the Lula government.

This development confirms the warnings of the Rank-And-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR) that the Lula government would follow the example of other capitalist leaders who, with each wave of the pandemic, withdrew the mitigation measures still in place. This, in turn, has allowed its wide circulation and the emergence of a subvariant such as XBB1.5, which has spurred a deadly wave in the US recently and now threatens Brazil.

If this process is not stopped through the global elimination of COVID-19, it could repeat itself indefinitely, with devastating consequences for the Brazilian and world populations. Therefore, the CBES-BR, which is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees (IWA-RFC), calls on teachers and the entire Brazilian working class to fight for this policy in alliance with workers all over the world and finally put an end once and for all to all the suffering caused by the pandemic.



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