Lula government embraces “forever COVID” in Brazil after WHO scraps coronavirus public health emergency

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12 May 2023

Last Friday’s decision by the World Health Organization (WHO), taken without any scientific basis, to end the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern was hailed by the Workers Party (PT) government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on Brazilian national radio and television. Health Minister Nísia Trindade declared that “our country receives this news with hope.”

Repeating the ruling elite’s discourse throughout the pandemic intended to force the population to “live” with the coronavirus, Trindade bluntly recognized: “We are still going to be living with COVID-19, which continues to evolve and mutate.” As she made clear, the Lula government is criminally accepting that “SARS-CoV-2 virus infections will continue,” bringing with it preventable deaths and all the debilitating symptoms associated with Long COVID for masses of people.

Significantly, at no point in her five-minute speech did Trindade refer to the dangers posed by Long COVID, a chronic condition that according to the WHO itself affects 10 percent of those infected with the coronavirus. Numerous studies have shown that Long COVID affects virtually every organ in the human body, and the risk of an infected person developing some of its symptoms increases with each reinfection.

Cynically, the PT government feigned a responsible attitude over the pandemic, with the minister declaring that “we must remain cautious” and strengthen “surveillance systems, diagnosis, care networks, and vaccination.” However, the Lula government has already shown it won’t advance any of these measures.

Since its inauguration on January 1, the Lula administration has maintained the attitude of criminal neglect toward the pandemic already established by Brazil’s former fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, who openly promoted the murderous “herd immunity” doctrine.

The Lula government continues to reject measures such as mass testing and the sequencing of circulating variants, necessary to assess the real extent of the pandemic, nor has it implemented campaigns to alert the population about the aerosol transmission of COVID-19 and the consequent need for quality masks.

In fact, what has been shown is that the supposedly “progressive” PT administration is advancing the systematic abandonment of every public health measure against COVID-19. In a decision sharply criticized by science and medical experts, it abandoned in early March the reporting of daily COVID-19 numbers, making it weekly. This came shortly after the government ignored the risks of the mass *Carnaval* parties amid a wave of the Omicron subvariant XBB1.5.

Soon after its lifting of the mask mandates in airports and airplanes in early March, ANVISA, the federal health agency, gave a green light to state and local governments to lift the mandates in Brazil’s crowded public transport systems. In early April, ANVISA removed mask mandates in the country’s hospitals as well.

For the Lula government, as for the ruling elites throughout the world, “remaining cautious” about COVID-19 means exclusively the promotion of vaccinations. But even that measure, by which the PT sought to differentiate itself from Bolsonaro’s anti-vaccine rants, has been a fiasco.

In late February, with the rollout of Pfizer’s bivalent vaccine exclusively for the over-60 population, people with comorbidities, pregnant women, and other “risk groups,” the Lula government began its “National Movement for Vaccination.” By April 20, only 17.6 percent of the eligible population had taken the bivalent vaccine. In the face of this debacle, the government moved to offer the bivalent vaccine for the general population over the age of 18, for which it had previously claimed the vaccine had “no proven benefit.”

Last year alone, Brazil recorded three of its five waves of the pandemic so far, driven, respectively, by Omicron subvariants BA.1, BA.4/5 and BQ.1. This year, with the

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predominance of the XBB.1.5 subvariant, 1,180,640 cases and 8,263 deaths have already been reported, a situation that may worsen with the already detected spread of XBB.1.6 and the approach of winter. Overall, Brazil has 37 million cases and 702,000 deaths, in addition to the countless millions suffering from Long COVID.

As if these numbers were not enough, they are hugely underestimated. A study earlier this year estimated, based on excess deaths, that by the end of 2022 Brazil had 1.14 million COVID-19 deaths, a number 1.6 times larger than the 693,000 recorded by then.

This policy of normalizing death and mass debilitation from COVID-19 has been denounced by many principled experts. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, neurologist and anti-COVID activist Beatrice drew attention to the "coherence" and "continuity" of that policy throughout Lula's first months in office. She declared in response to the government's announcement on Sunday:

"The minister spoke about the supposed 'end of the pandemic' that we all know cannot even be predicted. And as if this was not enough, she still criticized the 'disrespect for science' by her predecessors [in the Bolsonaro government], an attitude that is in fact continued when she mentions only vaccinations as a necessary measure, when we all know this is far from enough… [She] does not mention or inform about the airborne transmission of COVID and does not mention or give any orientation about the mitigation measures long identified and studied."

On Twitter, Beatrice also denounced the WHO decision, questioning its impact particularly on vaccinations in poor countries: "after ending the PHEIC [Public Health Emergency of International Concern] status of COVID 19 what will happen to COVID vaccines!?!? And what will happen to the still unvaccinated world!?!?"

The WSWS also spoke to Lucas Ferrante, a researcher at the Federal University of Amazonas, whose works has shown the role of schools in the dynamic of the pandemic in Manaus and the emergence of the Gamma variant, responsible for two-thirds of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil.

Regarding the global situation of COVID-19, Ferrante stated: "Many countries are still having an upsurge of the pandemic, especially in Asia.... So, the pandemic is not over, that is very important to stress." According to him, the spread of the coronavirus can still lead to "the emergence of a new variant [that] can circumvent the protection of the vaccines. This cannot be disregarded, and therefore the need of tracking new variants in the Brazilian territory."

Regarding the national situation, Ferrante said: "Brazil still has many COVID-19 cases and deaths, and that still cannot be accepted as a standard." He also drew attention to the large underreporting in Brazil, "mainly [after] the Lula government adopted the measure of reporting [COVID-19] cases on a weekly basis. That covers up a lot of the data."

Ferrante mentioned an article published on Monday in *Nature Human Behaviour* that features his statement on "The future of Brazilian Science." In it, he criticized the Lula government's initial decision to provide the bivalent vaccine only for some social groups, once "studies had found that vaccination of at least 90 percent of the entire population is necessary to eradicate severe forms of COVID-19, in addition to the need for a booster dose every four months."

He also pointed out that, while "The administration of President Bolsonaro (2019–2022) was notable for the prominent role of scientific denialism," "President Lula's two previous terms as president (2003–2010) … also showed worrying denialist tendencies (such as ignoring technical reports and scientists)." He concludes the article by saying, "the general population [should] not be deceived into thinking that a change of presidential administrations alone is sufficient to bring about the needed improvements in public health and the environment."

Indeed, the Lula government is working to lull the Brazilian population into thinking that the threat from COVID-19 is over. A recent social media post by the government's secretariat of communication read that "The pandemic has gone," while the front page of the Ministry of Health's own website on Tuesday morning carried the logo in capital letters "END OF THE PANDEMIC," which was then changed hours later.

A little over four months into the Lula government, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fully reactionary character of the new Workers Party government. It has come to power to defend the interests of the Brazilian and global capitalist elite, and it is determined to put private profits over human life.

The only scientifically based response to the pandemic, and the only one that represents the interests of workers, is the global elimination of COVID-19. The growing Brazilian and international working class movement must raise this demand to put an end to the pandemic as part of a broader struggle for international socialism.

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