

Lula government rules out universal COVID-19 vaccination, deepening “herd immunity” policy in Brazil

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1 February 2024

Just over a year after Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took office, the criminal negligence of his Workers Party (PT) government in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic has been thoroughly exposed.

Daily data on the pandemic was halted in February of last year, while in May the government welcomed the World Health Organization’s (WHO) decision to end the Public Health Emergency of International Concern for COVID-19 without any scientific basis. The government has failed to implement educational campaigns on the airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and the dangers still posed by COVID-19, and, at the end of last year, the Lula government ruled out COVID-19 vaccination for the entire population, even as the pandemic is still raging.

Pfizer’s bivalent vaccine, covering the original variants and the Omicron BA.1 or BA.4/BA.5 variant, began to be administered in February 2023 to people over 60, those over 12 with comorbidities, and other specific groups. At the end of April, with only 17.6 percent of the eligible population receiving the bivalent vaccine, the Lula government authorized it for the entire population over 18, despite claiming it would “not bring benefits.”

At the end of October, the Lula government announced that the COVID-19 vaccine would be included in the National Immunization Program (PNI) starting this year. However, it will only be applied to children between six months and five years old, older people, and other specific groups. Even if all the people included in the PNI are immunized, this will represent less than a third of the Brazilian population with a new shot of the COVID-19 vaccine in 2024.

Considering what was seen last year, even a reasonable level of immunization of this population is hardly likely. Having abandoned virtually all public health measures that help alert the public to the dangers of COVID-19, while leading the population to believe that the pandemic is over, the Lula government’s COVID-19 vaccination campaign has been a fiasco. In mid-December, vaccination coverage of the bivalent was still barely 17 percent.

Since coming to power, the Lula government has followed the strategy of the world’s ruling elite of scrapping all mitigation measures, such as mask-wearing, and insisting that “we will still live with COVID-19” and that “our great ally is vaccination,” according to Health Minister Nísia Trindade. Contrary to claims

that it would “follow the science” in its supposed “reconstruction” of Brazil, the Lula government’s decision to abandon universal COVID-19 vaccination shows that it is continuing and deepening the policy of “herd immunity” in Brazil initiated by fascistic ex-president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), normalizing continuous waves of mass infection, debilitation and death.

Several people concerned about the pandemic have spoken out on X/Twitter, denouncing the Lula government’s “herd immunity” policy. In a lengthy thread from the beginning of November, shortly after the announcement of the inclusion of the COVID-19 vaccine in the PNI, anti-COVID activist Márcio explained the limitations of the Lula government’s vaccination campaign: “In making this decision, the federal government claims to be following what is recommended by the WHO. In fact, this is their recommendation. However, we must understand that the WHO is a multilateral organization that uses equity to make its recommendations to member countries. In other words, this WHO suggestion is the minimum a country could offer its population. Therefore, Brazil could offer the maximum or more than the minimum, vaccinating its entire population.”

He also drew attention to the fact that the Lula government had not acquired the most up-to-date monovalent vaccines against the Omicron XBB.1.5 subvariant, which predominated in Brazil throughout most of last year and is being applied to virtually the entire population in the Northern Hemisphere. In the US, it is fully authorized for everyone 12 years or older, with an emergency use authorization for children six months to 11 years old.

In response to the Health Ministry’s claim that “For other people, including healthy adults, there is no recommendation for annual vaccination,” Márcio declared in another thread at the beginning of December: “This attitude of the current federal government denies reality. COVID-19 still represents a danger both in the acute phase and in its chronic phase (Long COVID).” Therefore, he added, this claim shows that “Brazil has officially become one of the most denialist countries regarding SARS-CoV-2.”

Indeed, it is a scientific fact that the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines decreases both over time and depending on the variant used to manufacture them and the variant against which it will act in case of infection, which is why pharmaceutical companies have been updating these vaccines regularly. Numerous studies have

also pointed out the need to have the maximum possible vaccination coverage, with vaccines updated against the newest variants and applied periodically as one of the instruments for effectively combating the pandemic.

Moreover, despite reducing the possibility of severe cases, the vaccines do not prevent infection and do not offer significant protection against the various effects of Long COVID, a chronic condition that can affect virtually every organ in the body and develops in 10-20 percent of those infected, according to the WHO. Despite all the danger that long COVID poses to the Brazilian population, this “mass debilitating effect” is a subject ignored by the Lula government.

Leading neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis, who has closely followed the dynamics of the pandemic in Brazil since its beginning, has also spoken out on X/Twitter. Throughout November, he questioned “the justification for not vaccinating the entire population in 2024 with new vaccines developed to combat the new variants derived from Omicron.” He went on to demand a “Strategic Plan from the Ministry of Health to deal with the tsunami of patients with chronic COVID that will hit the doors of the SUS [Unified Health System] in the coming months and years.”

In one of these posts, Nicolelis also charged: “Brazil has abandoned any surveillance ... Basically, we are flying blind.”

If monitoring the virus was one of the many measures entirely neglected by the Bolsonaro government, making it practically impossible to grasp the true extent of the pandemic in Brazil, this has only worsened under the Lula government. Last year, the number of RT-PCR tests carried out was the lowest since the beginning of the pandemic. By September, only 1.76 million tests had been carried out, compared to 9.5 million in 2020, 21 million in 2021, and 5.9 million in 2022.

Without implementing a nationally coordinated system for monitoring the pandemic or even making wastewater data available, the release of COVID-19 data occurs with significant gaps and underreporting every week, combining the data from the Brazilian states. The latest data shows that in the week between January 14 and 20, Brazil recorded 38,246 cases and 196 deaths from COVID-19. Overall, Brazil has recorded 38 million cases and 709,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic, in addition to the millions suffering from Long COVID.

After a wave between last September and November, the positivity rate monitored by *Todos pela Saúde* (All for Health), a non-profit organization that analyzes data from seven private laboratories in Brazil, has increased since the beginning of the year, indicating the start of a new wave. According to the organization’s bulletin on Monday, “after persisting in the 20 percent range for three months, positivity for COVID-19 rose again after the holiday season, reaching 27 percent.”

This coincides with the unchecked spread of the highly infectious and immune-resistant JN.1 subvariant. Predominant worldwide, it is driving a new wave in the US and other countries. According to the Fiocruz Epidemiological Institute, the prevalence of JN.1 jumped from 18.3 percent in November to 56.8 percent in December.

The Lula government, a loyal representative of the Brazilian and

international capitalist elites, showed in its first year that it has no interest in implementing a scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lula came to power to deepen the austerity policies implemented during his previous governments (2003-2010) in order to prioritize corporate profits over life. Today, this is being expressed in the “new fiscal regime” approved last year and the “zero deficit target” for the 2024 budget, both of which have been applauded by the international financial markets, even as they threaten the constitutional right to healthcare.

As the New Year’s statement published by the *World Socialist Web Site* analyzed, eliminating the novel coronavirus, the only scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic, “remains viable and necessary.” By the end of 2022, China demonstrated that the combination of several long-known public health measures, such as the use of high-quality masks, a strict surveillance and contact-tracing system, and vaccination, can stop the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, save lives, and prevent the debilitating effects of Long COVID. However, China’s elimination strategy has also shown the unfeasibility of “any nationally-based program in the epoch of imperialism.”

For the elimination strategy to be effective, the declaration emphasized that it must be globally coordinated through the “building of a mass movement fighting for the following principles: The fight against the pandemic is a political and revolutionary question which requires a socialist solution; The organization of public health must be on the basis of social need, not corporate profit; The profit motive must be entirely removed from all healthcare, pharmaceutical and insurance companies.”

In Brazil, advancing this program requires a conscious break with the Lula government and the ruling Workers Party, as well as with the unions and the pseudo-left that have helped implement the “herd immunity” policy. We call on all those fighting for a science-based program in response to the pandemic, principled scientists, and above all the Brazilian working class to carefully study the WSWS New Year’s statement and organize the fight for the global elimination of COVID-19 as part of an international socialist movement.



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