

Brazil's anti-COVID activists denounce Lula government's "forever COVID" policy

Part 1: "Practice shows that nothing will come from the Lula government"

Our reporters
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Brazil is facing a new wave of the COVID-19 pandemic driven by the uncontrolled spread of the more infectious and vaccine-resistant JN.1 variant of Omicron. Cases and deaths have risen by 56 and 28 percent respectively in the last two weeks, with the week of February 25 to March 2 recording 70,000 cases and 253 deaths, figures that represent a huge underestimation of the real toll.

While many who voted for Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the 2022 presidential election anticipated a change from the open policy of "herd immunity" pursued by the administration of the fascistic ex-president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), the new Workers' Party (PT) government is continuing and deepening Bolsonaro's policy.

At the end of February, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to four anti-COVID activists from Brazil, who have been speaking out mainly on X/Twitter, denouncing this situation and demanding that the Lula government implement science-based public health measures.

In the face of the media and government blackout on the pandemic, and particularly the debilitating effects associated with Long COVID, through X/Twitter and other social media they have been able to learn more about the scientific aspects of the pandemic and the disease, exchange information and join thousands of other people around the world still concerned with a pandemic that is far from over.

The second part of the interview will be published tomorrow.

"People are absolutely in the dark"

Lawyer Juliana Stamm worked intensively at the beginning of the pandemic to register hundreds of homeless people for the Bolsonaro government's emergency aid program. During the Lula administration, faced with the "data blackout" and other negligent measures, she began to make a number of inquiries about the pandemic from the federal government utilizing freedom of information laws.

One of the inquiries was about the number of tests carried out: "[Last year] I asked a question via the freedom of information law, [and they said] that in 2021 we had 21 million PCR tests carried out and reported. In 2022, we had 6 million and by September 2023 there were less than 1.8 million tests."

At the end of February 2023, shortly after Lula took office and in

the midst of a wave of infections in Brazil, the new government ended the daily reporting of data on the pandemic, which became weekly. The blackout of information on the pandemic is also made clear, according to Juliana, by the discontinuation of SARS-CoV-2 monitoring in sewage water: "Under the Bolsonaro government, as bad as it was, and it was a disaster, there was a rudimentary program by the National Waters Agency for sewage water monitoring, very limited, it was something like half a dozen points in Brazil. The last sewage water report is from November 2022."

She continued: "I thought: the program already exists, it will be resumed and improved under the Lula government because that's all we need. And I asked, via a freedom of information inquiry: what has been done with this program and what will be done with it? And the answer I got was hilarious. They said that in fact it was a measure that proved to be very effective in the epidemiological surveillance of SARS-CoV-2, but that they were awaiting authorization from superiors to re-implement it. That was in June and so far, we have nothing. And the quality of the data has only decayed, so much so that COVID tests are now being reported as severe acute respiratory syndrome. So, the quality of the data got worse and worse."

In conclusion, Juliana said: "Since the policy that has taken hold is one of you by yourself, then at least there should be transparency of data so that we can make an assessment of the circumstances. This is absolutely non-existent in Brazil. People are absolutely in the dark."

"Practice shows that nothing will come from the Lula government"

Beatriz Klimeck, who at the end of last year completed a doctoral thesis on the negligence of the World Health Organization (WHO) on the aerosol transmission of the new coronavirus and is now doing post-doctoral research at the University of California, San Diego on air quality, also believes that, regarding monitoring of the pandemic, "what was done [by the Bolsonaro government] would have been done [by the Lula government]". She continued: "If there was monitoring [under the Bolsonaro administration], there was a structure for it. I don't see a scenario that could have been so different. Why? Because the reopenings in many places were very

much the same.”

In fact, particularly since the second deadly wave of the pandemic in early 2021, governments of all political stripes have carelessly reopened businesses and schools. This includes the Workers Party (PT) state governments in Brazil’s Northeast region, which at the beginning of the pandemic applied limited measures to curb the spread of the new coronavirus, but then abandoned any effort in this direction.

Regarding vaccinations, Beatriz commented that “We don’t see Lula, for example, taking or talking about the booster dose,” or him and other members of the government, such as health minister Nísia Trindade, wearing masks.

“In the government’s campaigns, there is only a recommendation for the elderly and people in risk group to wear a mask. There’s not one person from the government doing this... How are they going to talk about air quality if they don’t have a purifier? How can we expect a campaign on air quality if the events continue to take place in crowded places, without masks or ventilation? Practice shows that nothing will come of it.”

“What the Lula government is doing is the bare minimum”

Graphic designer Fernanda Giulietti associated the Lula government’s negligence regarding the pandemic with a similar attitude in other areas, such as education, saying: “I don’t know if I expected much from the Lula government, not just in this area, but in others. If we take one of the health issues itself, we can see what is happening with the crisis of the Yanomami indigenous people. It had major repercussions at the beginning of last year, and the problem still hasn’t been resolved.”

She was referring to ominous data published at the end of February showing that in 2023, the first year of Lula’s government, the number of Yanomami killed (363) was higher than in 2022, the last year of Bolsonaro’s government (343).

On indigenous issues, health, education and other areas, “what the Lula government is doing is the bare minimum,” according to Fernanda.

Fernando Santos, who was infected with COVID in April 2021 and, after what he described as a mild case, suffers with various symptoms of Long COVID, exemplified what Fernanda pointed out by exposing the Lula government’s claim to follow what is recommended by the WHO: “I think it’s a very comfortable position when the health ministry says it’s following the WHO recommendations, which are very broad and serve for [very different countries like] Brazil, Indonesia and the US.”

“It’s very common to mention a recommendation out of context. The WHO also recommends abandoning the bivalent vaccine platform and using the monovalent vaccine platform, it also recommends wearing a mask in healthcare environments. Brazil does not follow any of these recommendations. With regard to vaccination with the monovalent vaccine, Brazil is already lagging behind countries like the US and the European Union, but also Chile and Mexico. This is incoherent.” He also recalled that the bivalent vaccine for children was not purchased by the Lula government.

“The WHO has also done the minimum on the aerosol transmission of COVID”

The WHO played a particularly criminal role in two key moments of the pandemic: by neglecting the aerosol transmission of COVID during the first months of the pandemic, and in May of last year, when it declared the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency without any scientific basis. This last decision was welcomed by the Lula government’s health minister, Nísia Trindade, in a public statement.

The study Beatriz carried out for her doctoral thesis shed even more light on the criminal nature of the WHO’s decision. According to her, “all the decisions related not only to the use of masks, but also to the amount of isolation days, [are made] within the WHO and the CDC as if they were bodies that are separate [from society], that are neutral, that are there to defend our best interests.”

Comparing the WHO’s stance with that of the Lula government’s health ministry, Beatriz said: “When it had to admit it’s mistake, that in fact transmission was by aerosol, it did the minimum, perhaps in the same way as Brazil’s health ministry, which is to put it somewhere hidden on its website. But there was a campaign to say that [transmission] wasn’t [by aerosol], and there wasn’t a campaign to say that it was.”

Particularly in relation to the protocols that should be implemented due to the fact that COVID is transmitted by aerosol, Beatriz stated: “The WHO has never recommended the use of FFP2 [masks]... mainly because it’s scary. In a letter from a businessman that I included in my thesis, he asks the CDC: ‘Are you going to say that it is spread by aerosol, and what about all the surface protocols that are being implemented to get people back [to work]? That can’t happen, the companies are scared to death.’ In this sense, you can’t not think about class, you can’t not think about who makes the decisions and what their interests are.”

For her, workplace safety also involves the quality of the air that workers breathe. This implies structural change: “If we’re talking about air quality in a broader sense, then we have to talk about structural change. With what budget? With the spending ceiling? It’s all very connected to these interests, which are also interests of the WHO, also of these organizations that are under pressure. If the CDC changed the isolation time to five days because the president of Delta Airlines was complaining, we can imagine other decisions that happen all the time.”



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