

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

Part 2: "Long COVID is the biggest threat to the health of the working class in this century"

Our reporters
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We are publishing the second part of the interviews that the WSWs carried out with four anti-COVID activists from Brazil at the end of February 2024. The first part, published on March 13, 2024, dealt mainly with the negligence of the Lula government and the World Health Organization in responding to the pandemic. In this second part, they talked about Long COVID, and the lack of measures by the Workers' Party government to curb the transmission of SARS-CoV-2.

"Long COVID is the biggest threat to the health of the working class in this century"

In April 2021, anti-COVID activist Fernando Santos was infected with COVID. Although he initially had mild symptoms, a few weeks later he began to manifest a series of symptoms caused by COVID, such as kidney inflammation and tachycardia. In July 2021, he was diagnosed with Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome/dysautonomia, a dysfunction of the nerves that regulate involuntary bodily functions such as heart rate, blood pressure and perspiration.

In addition to its lack of monitoring and failure to acquire more modern vaccines, the Lula government's negligence in responding to the pandemic has also been manifested in relation to Long COVID, considered by many experts to be the "pandemic within the pandemic."

According to Fernando, "The only time [Lula's health minister] Nísia Trindade, mentioned the term Long COVID on Twitter was very briefly, superficially, in 2022. At the turn of the year, we had the expectation that [the Lula government] would follow science. But then came all the frustration."

For him, today, "The Long COVID situation in Brazil is catastrophic, it's negligence and it's a public health crime." After a long account of the failed attempts to treat the symptoms of Long COVID, Fernando told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Since I had COVID back in 2021, to this day I'm still waiting for the first appointment at the specific Long COVID outpatient clinic."

From the Bolsonaro government to the Lula government, Fernando said, the Basic Health Units have not adapted to the evolution of knowledge about Long COVID, limiting themselves to cardiorespiratory physiotherapy. "We have data today that Long COVID affects people who have had mild cases much more and especially young adults, between the ages of 18 and 40-something. So, the policy for dealing with long-term COVID is completely wrong, it's still wrong. Under the previous government it was non-existent, and now it's taking off, but in a very wrong direction. We are lagging behind the rest of the world."

About the process of infection and the development of awareness about Long COVID, he said: "The notion I had of Long COVID until that moment [of infection] was of prolonged symptoms. The nomenclatures persistent COVID, long COVID, can imply that. I've been using chronic COVID, which I think has more appeal and more coherence."

For Fernando, all the experience with COVID has led to the conclusion that "Long COVID is the greatest threat of this century, of our era, to the health of the working class. That's a fact. Because it will permeate anything. If you talk about the climate crisis ... it's one thing to face a heatwave being 100 percent healthy. It's another thing for me now... I used to train jiu-jitsu, without a fan, in Rio de Janeiro's dismal 40°C sun, and I used to train happily. Now it's a little hotter here, because of the dysautonomia, I can't do anything. I have to sit at home drinking isotonic with my

legs up. I can't study properly, I can't work."

"There is no intention by the health ministry to try to mitigate SARS-CoV-2"

Lawyer Juliana, who has been making inquiries to the Lula government via freedom of information requests about the pandemic in Brazil, told the WSWs that her "intention was to understand what the government's official position is, considering that there is no clear position." She asked the federal government: "Should the population resign themselves to the fact that we will have to live with the virus forever, wave after wave?"

According to her, the Lula government says that "'We are pro-science, we are pro-vaccine', but there is no vaccine. [He's] using an idea of herd immunity that doesn't apply to COVID, ... and Nísia [Trindade, health minister] is in silence. Lula tweeted about the pandemic last July."

She continued: "In fact, they don't talk about it, they don't give an objective answer about it, but they give the impression that it's something we're really going to have to live with. So, there is no intention in the Ministry of Health to try to mitigate SARS-CoV-2. We shouldn't count on that."

On the other hand, "There are answers that are based on absolutely wrong things," such as the claim that "if you are vaccinated, you are protected," because vaccines do not prevent infection and the development of Long COVID. In addition, Juliana said, "There are still many official responses that don't address the transmission of COVID by aerosol."

Brazil is experiencing a desperate situation when it comes to babies and children dying from COVID. This year alone, there have been 48 deaths of babies and children up to the age of 14, 26 of them under the age of two. For those who survive the infection, Juliana drew attention to "a World Bank report that said humanity is compromising the intellectual development of an entire generation of children by repeated SARS-CoV-2 infections."

On this subject, in one of her inquiries via freedom of information requests, she asked: "If vaccines are the solution to the pandemic, how can we protect babies up to 9 months old who are not yet fully vaccinated? ... The answers are always very evasive and general ... In reality, there is no planning. The impression is that there isn't even a conversation about it within the Ministry of Health."

"The pandemic is a watershed in the world"

All the interviewees' concerns about COVID are linked to the wider issues the world is experiencing. Graphic designer Fernanda Giulietti expressed this, saying: "The pandemic is a watershed in the world, for humanity. It's not possible that we're not looking at it [in this way] ... I used an analogy about the 2008 crisis. The acute crisis has passed, but its repercussions are still there today, 15 years later. Things can't be solved, they don't end when they end, as the poet used to say. All the crises are adding up, like the indigenous crisis and global warming."

Fernando mentioned the need for the application of the precautionary principle in relation to COVID, ignored by all capitalist governments: "Healthy people are exposing themselves to risks, and they may later regret it, due to lack of information, and they will be abandoned, because the capitalist system sucks and grinds us down as long as we are productive. Today, when I'm not so productive for society, I'm seeing the reflection of that."

In contrast to the historical negligence of governments not only in relation to COVID and its chronic effects, but toward other post-viral syndromes that could even offer more answers today to Long COVID, an international network of activists has formed, mainly on social media.

Fernando concluded: "I wanted to leave my message of respect and to thank first the international Long COVID advocates. It was through them that I was able to acquire information to understand my illness and to position myself today as a person with a disability. In Brazil, I would also like to thank the patients with myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome... If I have all this information now, it's because they had it before me."

Fernando's and other activists' fight for science-based measures against the COVID-19 pandemic and for adequate COVID-19 care is part of an international movement in defense of public health. In the latest expression of this movement, a coalition of Long COVID patients will hold a march in Washington D.C., the US capital, on March 15 to protest the lack of care and funding for research into Long COVID treatments. Anti-COVID activists in Brazil should see this protest as part of their struggle and, in turn, activists in the US and around the world should count on their counterparts in Brazil to take this fight forward.



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