

Bolsonaro tells workers to work or starve as COVID-19 spreads in Brazil

By Tomas Castanheira
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Brazil recorded its first two COVID-19 deaths on Tuesday, while health authorities in São Paulo said that they were investigating four other patient deaths as possibly being caused by the coronavirus. The number of confirmed cases in Brazil has jumped to 314, along with about 2,000 more suspected cases. There are already cases of community transmission in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro where the two deaths took place. Given the low number of tests performed, most of them having been done in a single private hospital in São Paulo, the actual spread of the virus is far wider.

Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, after personally participating on Sunday in a far-right demonstration in defense of his government, made clear his determination to defend the interests of the capitalist market at the expense of the lives of Brazilian workers.

In an interview with *CNN Brasil*, Bolsonaro dismissed with derision any measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, stating that “many catch it, regardless of the care they take” and characterizing decisions to cancel mass sporting and entertainment events, as based on “neuroses” and “hysteria.”

In one of the most criminal statements on the pandemic made by any head of state in the world, Bolsonaro argued that the only options for workers were to keep working and accept that they will be infected, or die of hunger. “Unemployment leads people who no longer feed themselves very well to feed themselves even worse, then they will become more sensitive, once you are infected, it will lead to death,” he said.

As in every country, the coronavirus crisis is sharply exacerbating the social contradictions Brazil, among the most unequal in the world, with six individuals monopolizing the same amount of wealth as half of the population. The great masses of the Brazilian working class lack access to basic conditions of health care, housing, sanitation and secure work. In the major urban areas, the transport system is precarious and exposes the population, crammed into into trains and buses, to serious risks from the spread of the virus.

With one of the largest prison populations on the planet—more than 800,000 inmates—the government's disorganized response to the crisis triggered major rebellions on Monday. After having their right to work release suspended as a result of the pandemic, an estimated 1,500 prisoners escaped from four

penitentiaries in the state of São Paulo.

In the public hospitals of the Unified Health System (SUS), which serve 75 percent of the population, the number of available beds is less than half of what is estimated as necessary to attend to the expected explosion of COVID-19 cases in the coming weeks. Even worse, 95 percent of SUS ICU beds were already occupied even before the coronavirus outbreak.

But these numbers do not expose the extent of the terror confronting the population. A preliminary study by Oxford University in England, released by *Intercept Brasil*, calculated that the coronavirus could lead to 478,000 deaths in Brazil. This estimate is based on a possible contamination of 40 percent of the population, which would be a “moderate” outcome; the research done by Harvard, upon which the British scientists based their conclusions, states that this percentage can vary from 40 to 70 percent.

The response of the Bolsonaro government, and that of the Brazilian ruling class as a whole, is that the workers must pay for the entire crisis, including with their own lives.

In an act of cynical propaganda, Bolsonaro claimed last Thursday that he would allocate R\$5 billion (the equivalent of US\$1 billion) to combat the pandemic. This amount – wholly insufficient to meet the emergency demands of a country with more than 200 million inhabitants – will merely be transferred from the the existing budget of the National Health Fund, the same agency that is supposedly receiving this “emergency” funding. The measure is therefore equivalent to a net increase of zero in the resources needed to confront the crisis.

As local governments begin to close schools around the country, no alternatives are being offered to workers in terms of child care or for continuing to provide school lunches, which for many students is the main meal of the day. There is no plan to close private companies – workers who take time off due to illness, or are laid off by their bosses will be abandoned to their own fate. This is already beginning to occur in shuttered movie theater networks such as Cinemark and Kinoplex, where workers have been subjected to unpaid collective holidays, or reduced wages and voluntary layoff programs.

Assuming that it is the duty of the workers themselves to bear these costs, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes has proposed

measures such as advancing the 13th salary to retirees and allowing workers to withdraw money from the FGTS (Fundo de Garantia do Tempo de Serviço), a government-run fund, paid into by employers, to compensate workers fired without just cause or injured on the job. Meanwhile, he is negotiating a series of actions to “rescue the economy,” that is, the capitalist class, such as the suspension of corporate tax payments and providing capital at lower interest rates.

The defense of capitalist profits is also the policy of the so called Workers Party (PT). The PT published on Monday an official note with the title “proposals to confront the coronavirus and resume economic growth.” The main interest of the PT in this crisis is to appeal to sections of the Brazilian bourgeoisie by criticizing the policies of Bolsonaro and Guedes as incompetent from the standpoint of the development of the national capitalist economy. It exhibits the same negligence as the fascist Bolsonaro in the face of the pandemic. Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Brazil’s former PT president, wrote on Twitter about two weeks ago: “The world is scared of the coronavirus ... How many children die of hunger every day?” This ignorant and dismissive “left” comment came days after the party’s president, Gleisi Hoffmann, said that the pandemic was being used by the government as “an excuse” for mass capital flight from Brazil.

In the ABC Paulista region, one of the country's main industrial centers where the PT had its original base, the Metalworkers Union of ABC (SMABC) issued a statement Monday, written by its president Wagner Santana, an important political figure in the PT. It makes clear the intentions of the union and the party to guarantee the regular functioning of the factories, no matter what the cost in the health and lives of workers:

“Everyone is responsible for their own personal care. But there are also collective protections that the companies have to take, such as [not] sharing a spoon when picking up rice from a tray, taking care of the railings inside the plant, cleaning public transportation ... Take care of yourselves. This is the only way we’re going to get through this drastic period of pandemic.”

The subservience of the PT stands in sharp contrast to the mood among the workers themselves. To prevent mass upheavals among workers seeing their relatives die in hospital lines, the ruling class will have to resort to increasingly open violence. On Tuesday, Brazil’s health and justice ministers announced the re-institution of a punitive 1940s-era quarantine law imposed under the dictatorship of President Getulio Vargas, allowing for the use of police to enforce orders of quarantine and jail sentences of a year or more for those who defy them.

This draconian approach stood in sharp contrast to the behavior of the Brazilian president. In an official statement made on the national networks last Thursday, Bolsonaro used the pretext of the coronavirus to promote fascist demonstrations that were called for March 15 against Congress

and the courts and for a strengthening of executive power and military intervention. Having stated, on one hand, that in the face of the epidemic the protests should be “rethought”, Bolsonaro, on the other hand, promoted them, saying that “the motivations of popular will are still alive and unshakeable”.

The hypocrisy of Bolsonaro's appeal for “rethinking” the protests on public health grounds was exposed by his direct participation in the rally in Brasilia and his dissemination on his Twitter account of photos and videos from demonstrations across the country.

The demonstrations, promoted as #Bolsonaroday, had an openly fascist character, demanding the return of the repressive legal regime imposed under the military dictatorship, under the so-called AI-5 (Institutional Act-5), the closing of the Congress and the criminalization of communism. Following Bolsonaro's ideological line, the demonstrators dismissed the coronavirus pandemic as fake news, calling it “comunavirus” (communist-virus) in speeches delivered from sound trucks.

This criminal dismissal of the threat from COVID-19 was exemplified by Bolsonaro’s wading into the crowd in Brasilia, shaking hands and taking selfies with protesters, putting hundreds at risk. The Brazilian president is still waiting for results from a second coronavirus test after being in close contact with at least 12 people with confirmed cases of the disease, four of whom were part of his entourage when he visited US President Donald Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

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