

Brazilian stadium turned into field hospital as ruling class closes ranks behind corporate bailouts

By Miguel Andrade
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Shocking images of Brazilian public venues being turned into field hospitals for COVID-19 patients began to circulate last week, as the country's ruling class turns increasingly to the military, first and foremost in the person of the country's vice president, Gen. Hamilton Mourão, to defuse the growing conflicts between local governments and President Jair Bolsonaro over the COVID-19 crisis.

Yesterday, amid growing calls for an end to the "chaos" provoked by the fascistic President Bolsonaro's crude denials that coronavirus poses any threat, General Mourão issued an ominous tweet celebrating the 1964 US-backed coup that inaugurated a 21-year, blood-soaked military dictatorship. It stated: "56 years ago, the Armed Forces intervened to face the disorder, subversion and corruption that ravaged institutions and scared the population," while going on to claim that the military regime "initiated reforms that developed Brazil."

The growing movement to legitimize the hated Brazilian military as the "adults in the room" during the crisis has been promoted most enthusiastically by the supposedly opposition Workers Party (PT). The views of these layers were summed up by *El País'* Afonso Benites, who reported on March 26, "Isolated, Bolsonaro sees the Army, vice president Mourão and 27 governors distancing themselves on the coronavirus crisis," only to write a day later, "Worried over Bolsonaro's reaction to the coronavirus, military heads are turning on alert signs and indicating support for Mourão."

The vice president's pro-coup statement follows the announcement by Rio de Janeiro Governor Wilson Witzel last Thursday that the internationally iconic

Maracanã Stadium, which hosted two Soccer World Cup finals, would be turned into a site for 200 intensive care units. In São Paulo, the Anhembi Complex, where the city's Sambadrome for competitive Carnival parades is located, will also receive 300 intensive care units, and another 200 will be placed in the city's listed heritage site, the art deco Pacaembu Stadium, as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly sweeps the country.

The official death toll in Brazil reached 201 Wednesday, rising six times as fast as during the beginning of the pandemic in Wuhan, China. The official number of cases stood at 5,717. However, much evidence suggests that the official count is a gross underestimate. The Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), an independent federal body leading epidemiological research in the country, has reported a tenfold growth in the hospitalization of patients with breathing symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

Morgues are daily reporting dozens of closed-casket, 10-minute burials of untested individuals suspected of having died of COVID-19. In São Paulo alone, where cases have reached 1,500 and deaths have topped 100, 12,000 tests are being processed, under conditions in which only sick patients are tested.

The confirmed COVID-19 death of the Workers Party (PT) mayor of the small town of São José do Divino, in the distant countryside of the impoverished northeastern state of Piauí, where only two dozen of cases have been recorded, also raises the prospect of a vast underestimation of the number of cases in Brazil's most impoverished regions. A recent study of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found Brazil has an up to 90 percent undercount, bringing the likely total of cases to at least 50,000.

Against this backdrop, the Brazilian Central Bank (BC) announced on March 23 that it would inject 1.2 trillion reais (US\$240 billion) of liquidity into the financial markets, taking the lead from the US Federal Reserve. No less than 870 billion reais—72 percent of the total—are going into direct guarantees of liquidity for the banks. A few days later, on Thursday, March 26, the House unanimously passed a bill potentially offering 60 million informal and “autonomous” workers half a minimum wage (\$100) for three months—well short of the plan devised even by ultra-liberal economists, such as the former BC head Armínio Fraga, to provide a full minimum wage to 100 million Brazilians. This was the plan backed by the PT during the vote, only to support the government’s proposal hours later.

The total projected expenditure on what the PT called a “universal minimal income” will be a paltry 45 billion reais, only 6 percent of the total package of 780 billion reais. It also represents a mere 3 percent of the BC liquidity injection operation, over which Congress will have no oversight. It will moreover leave out no less than 11 million workers currently registered for poverty relief programs through the national “unified registry” that functions as the basis of *Bolsa Família*, the PT’s former flagship income transfer program.

That the “minimal income” package was passed unanimously, with the government taking the lead in raising it by 100 reais in the last hours of the vote and the PT praising it as a milestone and historical victory over “neoliberalism,” exposes the real role of the Workers Party.

The PT’s criticism of the deranged comments on coronavirus made by Bolsonaro has sought to cast the fascist president’s actions as an aberration in an otherwise healthy capitalist order. They have now reached the point of invoking even Donald Trump and Steve Bannon for “defending social isolation” and thus being more “responsible” than Bolsonaro in the face of the pandemic.

PT representatives attacked Bolsonaro from the right and the standpoint of nationalism for not blocking the sale of ventilators to Italy and not blocking the entrance of US citizens as the US turned into the epicenter of the global pandemic. The party’s president, Gleisi Hoffmann, on March 23—the day of the announcement of the 1.2 trillion reais credit operation by the

BC—declared that the Brazilian Congress should “mirror” the actions of capitalist governments in France, the UK, Spain, Germany and the US, all of which approved similar massive corporate and financial handouts.

As for the triumphant declarations by PT’s ideologues that the COVID-19 crisis has “debunked neoliberalism” worldwide, their hailing of the Trump administration’s massive “quantitative easing” package as one that Brazil should “mirror” speaks volumes about what the PT’s criticism of “neoliberalism” has always been. Over the four decades of the party’s existence, it was never meant to expose capitalism, but rather to defend it.

There are mounting indications in Brazil, as around the world, that workers will not passively accept the choice of being corralled back to work under unsafe conditions, bringing the infection back to their homes, or starving to death. In a remarkable demonstration of class anger across Brazil, workers heckled luxury cars parading on Sunday against the statewide quarantines and calling for people to “get back to work.” This follows strikes against unsafe conditions in the auto industry and call centers across the country.

The PT and the pseudo-left Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) view this independent class movement with undisguised hostility. Leonardo Attuch, the chief editor of PT’s mouthpiece, *Brasil 24/7*, seized on isolated reports from right-wing outlets about dissatisfaction among truck drivers over declining revenues and unsafe conditions to declare, bluntly and without a shred of evidence, that a truckers’ strike would be part of Bolsonaro’s plan for a coup. Such reactionary slander is a clear attempt to poison public opinion against mass industrial action by truckers and other sectors, and to justify state repression.

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