

With the collapse of health care system, Ecuador is the epicenter of the coronavirus crisis in Latin America

By Tomas Castanheira
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The coronavirus pandemic in Latin America has had its most devastating impact in Ecuador. According to data released by the government on Wednesday, April 15, there were 7,858 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country and 369 deaths. The focus of the pandemic is the port city of Guayaquil, capital of Guaya province, which accounts for over 70 percent of the cases.

According to the official data, Ecuador is the second in terms of the absolute number of deaths from the disease on the continent, trailing only Brazil—with 1,736 confirmed deaths—which has a population that is 12 times larger.

However, as President Lenín Moreno himself admits, due to the general lack of tests, the official figures are a gross underestimate. Cynthia Viteri, the mayor of Guayaquil, from the Christian Social Party, said that mathematical projections made by experts point to more than 7,000 COVID-19 deaths in her city alone.

Jorge Wated, the leader of the task force organized by the government to collect bodies after the collapse of the funeral system, made a terrifying statement last Sunday. According to him, in recent weeks, 771 bodies have been removed by his team from residences in Guayaquil and another 631 dead from overcrowded hospital morgues. In some areas, bodies have been left in the street.

Although the task force has collected and buried many bodies, there are reports that at cemetery gates there are still rows of family cars carrying the bodies of their relatives inside sealed cardboard coffins.

Other families are condemned to endless searches to find the bodies of their loved ones. In a report to *Agencia EFE*, Liliam Larrea said that her father died on March 31 and she only was informed of the location of his body 10 days later. She was waiting for the weekend so she could remove him from an improvised morgue and transport him to the cemetery in her car.

She also reported that she had gone to three private clinics that refused to admit her father, who had respiratory

problems, before being accepted by a specialized hospital. The doctor on duty at the hospital warned her to prepare herself, as her father “would not overcome this one,” although he arrived walking and conscious.

Health care professionals represent a considerable portion of coronavirus cases. The Ministry of Health reported about 10 days ago that more than 1,600 doctors, nurses and technologists were infected. More recently, the minister regretted that many doctors summoned on an emergency basis were deserting after discovering they would be sent to Guayaquil.

There is a total collapse of the health care system. Hospitals report a massive staff shortage, as many have taken medical leave after becoming infected. The Teodoro Maldonado Carbo hospital of the Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security (IESS) reported that it is operating with half the regular number of nurses in the ICU. “There is a nurse for every 16 critical patients, this is a difficult fight, we are not supplied,” the hospital staff told *El Universo*.

Nurses from the IESS hospital and other hospitals have protested on social media over the lack of basic equipment. “They send us to war without weapons. We don’t have the protective materials, especially the N95 masks, the disposable materials, and the clothes they give us are the disposable aprons, one for each shift, there is no disinfectant to wash our hands well ... and if we take sick days off, they start giving us white cards (dismissals),” reported a nurse from the Francisco de Ycaza Bustamente Hospital.

The immense social crisis faced by the Ecuadorian population is a result of the criminal negligence of the ruling class and Lenín Moreno’s government, which, following the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) austerity agenda, has annihilated funding for health care.

At the end of March, as he tried to stifle the explosion of the pandemic in the country and the collapse of the health system, Moreno accelerated payment of US\$320 million in debt, declaring that the government’s priority is “to bring

credibility.” “That is why we have already received the support of the International Monetary Fund,” he said.

Last Sunday, the president made a new nationally televised statement, announcing a series of emergency measures to supposedly combat the coronavirus crisis in the country. In fact, through these measures, Moreno is taking advantage of the situation to advance his policies of attacks on the working class.

The government plans to create a so-called National Humanitarian Emergency Account, aimed at rescuing companies and providing basic aid to the poorer sectors of the population. To this end, it will tax for three months the profits of companies with an income larger than US\$1 million, by 5 percent.

However, most of this fund will be financed by working class wages. Those who earn more than \$500 a month will be required to make progressive contributions for nine months. Salaries of civil servants above \$1,000 will also be taxed, at 10 percent.

Trying to cover up this attack with grotesque populism, Moreno announced that he will cut his own salary and that of other government officials by 50 percent. Even after these cuts, everyone will still receive over \$2,000 a month, while they plan to allocate \$60 in aid to the most impoverished for just two months.

At the same time, the government is preparing legislation for the urgent consideration of the national legislature. In the name of halting layoffs, it will propose “free negotiation between the parties” on the reduction of working hours and wages, as well as payment dates, in agreements valid for up to two years and with the option of renewal for two more! The content of this proposal is exactly the same as the labor reform that Moreno has been trying to approve since last year and was blocked by massive strikes and protests.

Instead of protecting workers, this measure will only give employers more freedom to continue the destruction of jobs. In the midst of the pandemic, a number of companies have invoked “force majeure,” using a clause in the Ecuadorian Labor Code to carry out mass layoffs without paying any compensation.

Moreno has attempted to shift the responsibility for these onto his predecessor, Rafael Correa, whom he served as vice president. About a week ago, Correa was sentenced for corruption to eight years in prison, together with a 25-year suspension of his political rights. He was accused of receiving illegal financing from companies. Referring to him, Moreno said: “The pandemic hit us at a critical moment, when we were trying to surpass a very tough economic crisis. A crisis caused by the irresponsible debts we inherited and the robberies of those who were just convicted.”

Moreno’s greatest fear, however, is not of his bourgeois political rivals, but rather the masses of workers and indigenous peasants. In his speech last Sunday, he launched an abstract threat, but one that must be understood as directed against the latent social opposition. “Be very careful,” said Moreno, “those who want to commit abuses, or who want to benefit from this serious, very serious situation. Personally, I will make sure that the law punishes these abuses with all its weight!”

In protest against the measures announced by Moreno, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), along with unions and other organizations that claim to be of a “popular” character, called a “cacerolazo” (beating pans in protest) this past Sunday.

CONAIE, just as its opponent Moreno, addresses itself to Washington to resolve the political crisis in Ecuador. On April 7, it sent a letter denouncing the government and making a series of demands to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), administered by the Organization of American States (OAS)—the same US-dominated body that recently legitimized a military coup in Bolivia. The letter concludes: “We trust in the intervention of the Inter-American Human Rights System, as well as in its objectivity.”

The opposition to the government led by CONAIE has the same political character that was seen in the mass uprising of October of last year: it works to demoralize the Ecuadorian masses of the city and the countryside and in order to politically subordinate them to the bourgeoisie.

The working class and the peasant population cannot overcome the deep social and economic crisis, extremely aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic, without confronting the country’s subordination to the profit interest of international capital and the national bourgeoisie. In this struggle, all sectors of the Ecuadorian ruling class are mortal enemies and are inextricably bound with imperialism.

The workers need to establish an independent political movement for a socialist government in alliance with the international proletariat, especially the working class of the rest of Latin America and the United States.

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