

Strikes and protests by Brazilian nurses amid explosion of COVID-19 cases

By Tomas Castanheira
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With Brazil now registering the third highest number of confirmed COVID-19 infections in the world, rapidly turning into the global epicenter of the pandemic, masses of working people in the country are facing an increasingly calamitous situation.

In Amazonas, the first state to declare the collapse of its health system, the disease has already spread into all the municipalities of its interior. The city with the highest mortality rate for COVID-19 in the whole country is Tabatinga, with a rate of 70 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. Tabatinga is located in the southern Amazonian region of Alto Solimões, which has more than 200 indigenous villages, now threatened with decimation by the virus.

São Paulo, the most populous state in the country, has the greatest number of infections, with some 70,000 confirmed cases reported by Wednesday, along with over 5,000 deaths. According to research conducted at the University of São Paulo's School of Medicine, the real number of cases in the state is already over 800,000.

Six public hospitals in the capital city of São Paulo, which accounts for more than half of the state's cases and deaths, already have 100 percent of their ICU beds occupied. The new coronavirus is spreading with the greatest force and speed in the city's densely populated working class neighborhoods, which suffer from extremely precarious infrastructure. The neighborhood with the highest number of cases and deaths continues to be Brasilândia, which has 260,000 inhabitants, no hospital and over 150 deaths. In the working class neighborhoods in the south of São Paulo, the number of deaths has doubled in the last 15 days.

On Monday, protesters began a march from Paraisópolis, one of the largest and poorest neighborhoods in the Southern Zone of São Paulo, to the Palácio dos Bandeirantes, the seat of the state government. The marchers were denouncing their abandonment to hunger, a constant lack of water and no access to health care. The demonstration was blocked by the shock troops of the military police.

In Rio de Janeiro, more than 30,000 cases and 3,000 deaths have been confirmed. The explosion of deaths attributed to respiratory failure indicates that the real number of fatalities caused by COVID-19 is twice that registered by the government. The health system of the state had collapsed by early May, with 98 percent of ICU beds occupied.

Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, which are also suffering from hunger and a lack of water, have more COVID-19 deaths than 15 states in Brazil. The website *Maré de Notícias* denounced the gross

underreporting of deaths from the new disease in the Maré Complex, a group of 16 *favelas* with more than 140,000 inhabitants. As of May 4, the government had confirmed only six deaths in the community, while residents were sending daily messages to WhatsApp groups reporting the deaths of relatives with respiratory syndromes.

Disease and hunger in the *favelas* overlap with brutal state violence, with daily police raids that result in the slaughter of residents. In addition to the operation that left 13 dead in the Alemão Complex last Friday, a 14-year-old boy was murdered by police in São Gonçalo, in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, earlier this week. On Wednesday, another 18-year-old youth was killed by police while participating in a distribution of food baskets in the Cidade de Deus community, in the western zone of Rio de Janeiro.

The disease is also spreading to the Brazilian prison population, the third largest on the planet. There are 729,949 prisoners in Brazil, crammed into overcrowded prisons, filled to over 160 percent capacity. Almost a third of the prisons do not have any health care, and 30 percent of all tuberculosis cases in the country are inside the jails—which gives COVID-19 devastating potential.

The Brazilian state has adopted a criminal policy toward the prison population, releasing no more than the average number of inmates released over the last six months. Visits have been prohibited, as has the sending of packages by families. The survival of large numbers of prisoners depends on receiving these packages, containing medicines and basic items such as toilet paper and food.

This situation is provoking revolts by both inmates and their families. In Amazonas, a violent rebellion erupted in the Puraquequara Prison Unit on May 2. The inmates protested against the rotten food they are served and the absence of any medical assistance.

Last Monday, families of prisoners protested for their rights in the states of Bahia and Piauí, both in the northeast of Brazil, holding posters saying: "Prisoners have their rights too" and "Coronavirus kills."

In Teresina, capital of Piauí, where at least 47 prisoners in the Altas Public Prison have COVID-19 symptoms, the families marched to the seat of government, raising posters that said: "No more treating the prisoners like animals."

On the same day, also in Teresina, there was another workers' protest. Nurses and nursing technicians of the Emergency Hospital

of Teresina (HUT) demonstrated against the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) after the death of a colleague, 60-year-old nursing technician Solange Mourinho, a victim of COVID-19.

Health professionals at HUT denounced the high rate of contamination, especially in the “non-COVID” wards, where workers are even less equipped and end up coming into contact with people infected by the disease. They also demanded an additional 40 percent wage increase for hazardous conditions for everyone, regardless of the ward in which they work.

The coronavirus is killing more nurses in Brazil than anywhere else in the world. According to the Federal Nursing Council (Cofen), there are 15,000 Brazilian nurses infected and 137 have been killed by COVID-19. All over the world, the International Council of Nurses has recorded approximately 260 deaths.

Last week, the Federal Council of Medicine (CFM) announced that it had received about 17,000 complaints from doctors who work in COVID-19 care centers. The main one—almost 40 percent of the total—is the lack of PPE, followed by the lack of supplies, testing and medicines and the lack of professionals in the units.

Health care workers have responded to the situation with a series of militant demonstrations, in many cases organized independently of the professional unions and criticizing their passivity.

Between last week and this week, dozens of protests and strikes by health care workers have been recorded across the country. This includes Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, and Ponta Gossa, Paraná in the south of the country; the city of São Paulo and the port city of Santos, the capital of Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais in the Southeast Region; Goiânia, Goiás, and the Federal District, in the Midwest; Salvador, Bahia, and Teresina, Piauí in the Northeast; and in Rio Branco, Acre, and Macapá, Amapá in the North.

While the workers are protesting for their lives, the bourgeoisie as a whole and its political representatives are pursuing a radically opposed agenda. In all parts of the country, measures of social distancing are being overthrown and a return to work is being imposed in most sectors.

The entire automobile industry has returned to production. Since the beginning of the week, General Motors has resumed production at its plants in São Caetano do Sul and São José dos Campos, in the state of São Paulo, and Volkswagen has resumed production at its plant in São José dos Pinhais, in the state of Paraná.

Last week, Fiat Chrysler resumed production at its plant in Betim, Minas Gerais, with more than 4,000 employees, while Jeep resumed its activities in Pernambuco.

On Wednesday, the transnational meat processing corporation JBS, based in Brazil, managed to reopen its plant in Passo Fundo, Rio Grande do Sul, which had been closed since the end of April by the Regional Labor Management after the site was proven to be a COVID-19 breeding ground. There were 94 cases registered among the factory employees and seven dead among their relatives.

The reopening of the Passo Fundo unit is the result of a weeks-long battle fought by JBS, with support from the media, state governor Eduardo Leite of the Brazilian Social Democratic

Party (PSDB) and the Superior Labor Court.

The risk to the lives of hundreds of workers and their families in the Passo Fundo facility, as well as thousands of other workers in meat processing plants that will continue to operate in the country, is completely secondary to the profit interests of JBS shareholders. On Thursday, XP Investments strongly recommended the purchase of JBS shares, which it claims have a potential of increasing 66.3 percent in value.

With thousands upon thousands of workers being sent back into workplaces that are truly breeding grounds for COVID-19, a new wave of sick and dying patients will overwhelm already crowded hospitals throughout Brazil.

The already catastrophic situation facing health care professionals will be further aggravated. More doctors, nurses and attendants will be infected as their workloads grow even more punishing. Choosing which patients will be given a chance to survive and which must be left to die will become routine.

The working class can confront this catastrophe only through a struggle to wrest control of the whole of society from the hands of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

Workers must organize themselves in the factories through health and safety commissions, elected by the workers themselves and completely independent of the unions. These commissions must determine safe working procedures—assisted by health care professionals and scientists—and have the power to stop production in the face of any threat to workers’ health.

In the neighborhoods, it is the workers themselves, and not the police, who must look after security and social distancing measures. To ensure conditions in which masses of working people can survive, the fortunes of the capitalist elite must be expropriated and dedicated to guaranteeing a decent income to all families.

Health care professionals must manage the health system, determining safe working procedures. The beds of the private system should be open to any patient, without indemnification to for-profit health care companies.

These objectives can be achieved only through the independent political mobilization of the Brazilian working class, united with the worldwide movement of workers facing these same conditions, and assuming a socialist and revolutionary direction.

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