

Brazil surpasses two million coronavirus cases as reopening drive continues

By Tomas Castanheira
18 July 2020

Brazil surpassed the mark of 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases after 43,829 new infections were recorded Thursday. The country is approaching 77,000 deaths from the disease, with 1,299 on Thursday alone, the highest rate of daily deaths in the world.

These staggering numbers, an underestimation amid widespread lack of testing, express the result of the “back to work” policy being promoted by all political parties of the Brazilian ruling class.

Between the beginning of May and the third week of June, more than 5 million of the 16.6 million people who were off work as a result of the pandemic returned to their activities, according to a survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

As the parties gave the push to suspend all measures to contain the virus at the beginning of May, Brazil had still 100,000 confirmed cases and just over 6,000 deaths. The following months witnessed a deadly escalation of the disease, with more than 500,000 cases, 25 percent of the total, having been recorded in the unfinished month of July alone. Coronavirus deaths have sped up this week in ten Brazilian states.

Instead of recognizing the catastrophic consequences of its policies, the Brazilian political establishment, headed by the fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, is continuing with its plans to reopen, resuming more and more activities.

In São Paulo, the state hardest hit by the virus, right-wing governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) claimed the state had arrived at a supposed “plateau” of infections and enacted the highest relaxation of social distancing measures since the pandemic began. It is time for a “return to normalcy,” he declared.

The “plateau” of the virus in São Paulo boils down to the “explosion of a Boeing 747 every day,” in the words of Dimas Covas, director of the Butantan Institute research center, and member of the state’s Coronavirus Contingency Center. On Thursday, São Paulo registered 398 new deaths. “This may last until next year,” declared Covas.

On Thursday, the capital of Rio de Janeiro, the second

most affected state, entered “phase 4” of its economic reopening, with expansion of the capacity of gyms and shopping malls, and the resuming of team sports practice on the beaches. On the same day, the state registered 133 deaths and more than 1,600 new cases. Mayor Marcelo Crivella, of the right-wing Republicans party, was planning to reopen kindergartens, but retreated in the face of massive opposition from parents and educators.

However, for Bolsonaro, the measures taken by governors and mayors are still timid. Since he tested positive for COVID-19 on last week, he has been promoting a campaign to accelerate the general resumption of activities in the country.

On the same day that Brazil reached 2 million cases, Bolsonaro declared in his usual live-stream: “We cannot continue suffocating the economy. Can you understand that the lack of wages, the lack of jobs kills, and kills more than the virus itself? Is it difficult to get it?”

Bolsonaro believes that his sociopathic positions have been completely substantiated from the point of view of the profit interests of Brazil’s ruling class. Since the first cases of COVID-19 in the country, he has opposed any measure that would affect capitalist production, threatening the workers that they would starve if they were removed from work to protect themselves from the virus.

“Now the press starts showing what I was talking about back then,” he said this Thursday. “But, when you said it back then, you weren’t in the mood, it wasn’t politically correct. Standing alone against the tide isn’t easy. The people also said, he’s alone, he’s the only world leader who talks about it.”

Bolsonaro praises the large volume of exports by the agribusiness sector, which, according to him, “is very good for Brazil.” “There was no unemployment, folks worked in the countryside, unlike the city, where many governors and mayors decided to go for the lockdown.”

The maintenance of agribusiness activities in the midst of the pandemic, especially the meat processing industry, ensured a substantial growth in exports, with an increase of

17.5 percent in the first four months of 2020. At the same time it has been the main source of spread of the virus around the country outside of the major cities.

Whole Brazilian cities have been contaminated from outbreaks in meat processing plants, which operate under highly unsafe conditions favourable to the transmission of the disease. A study conducted in June in Taquari, a meat industry city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, showed that its rate of contamination was 14 times higher than the rest of the state.

Since then, infections among meat processing workers in Rio Grande do Sul have increased 40 percent, reaching over 6,000 confirmed cases. In the states of Santa Catarina and Paraná, also in the south of the country, there are 3,132 and 3,246, respectively, infected workers at the meat processing plants. Over the last two weeks, the average number of deaths increased 98.5 percent in Rio Grande do Sul, 95.8 percent in Paraná and 47.7 percent in Santa Catarina.

The actual numbers are certainly much higher and, according to Rio Grande do Sul's labor prosecutor, Priscila Schvarcz, are being concealed by the meat processing companies. In an interview with *Folha de São Paulo*, Schvarcz said: "When they talk of 20 cases, in fact, there are from 200 to 300. It's at least ten [times] more than what they initially say."

Schvarcz denounced, particularly, the refusal of the Brazilian based transnational food corporation JBS to sign any agreement to regulate its operations, such as the use of masks, or protocols of transportation of the workers.

Such companies have virtually no impediments to the normal operation of their activities, regardless of the deathly risks they impose on workers and to public health of the cities where they are located.

In Paraná, amidst the devastation, the government of Ratinho Júnior of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) withdrew this week a "tougher" regulation on meat processing plants, which required 6.5 feet of distancing between workers and paid time off for "at risk" workers. This came just after a meeting between the government and JBS executives, which announced an investment of 800 million reais (about US\$148 million) in the state, with massive tax rebates for the company.

Despite attempts by governments and companies, the catastrophic situation in the meat plants cannot be completely covered up. China, whose economic recovery has boosted the prospects of high profitability of meat processing companies, has begun to reject the products of a series of Brazilian meat processing units, claiming a high risk of contamination by coronavirus.

In defense of the corporations, Agriculture Minister Tereza Cristina called for the restrictions to be lifted,

arguing "there is no scientific proof that COVID-19 can be transmitted through food." She also claimed that meat processing plants are "complying with all the protocols," and the problem is that "they are testing a lot of people... If they didn't test them, maybe there wouldn't be all this negative repercussion over the sector."

Besides her willingness to say anything to benefit her interests, the minister's statement highlights the completely irrational character of the development of the economy under the interests of capitalist profit, as Bolsonaro virulently argues.

Despite their differences, all the political forces linked to capitalism are incapable of offering an alternative path. The Brazilian trade unions, defending so-called national "strategic interests," demonstrated last week in front of the Ministry of Economy for an "Economic Recovery Agenda," poorly disguised with empty phrases for added safety.

A real recovery of the economy can only take place under the control of the workers, through the establishment of rank-and-file safety committees, to demand safe procedures in the workplaces and social distancing in the neighborhoods, and to democratically determine what production is essential and where products should go.

This struggle is, by its very nature, international and involves the independent political mobilization of the global working class for direct confrontation of the transnational corporations, the financial oligarchy and their governments.

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