

Latin America, epicenter of COVID-19 pandemic, on the brink of social explosion

By Tomas Castanheira
12 September 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has created devastating conditions for the whole of Latin America. On Tuesday, the region reached the grim milestone of 300,000 COVID-19 deaths and, on Thursday, surpassed 8 million infections.

The most affected country, in absolute numbers, is Brazil, the most populous in the region. It ranks third in the world in terms of total recorded cases, trailing only India and the United States, and has the second highest number of deaths, exceeded only by the US. It has already confirmed more than 4.2 million cases and 130,000 deaths. Following Brazil comes Mexico, which has registered about 650,000 cases and almost 70,000 deaths, the fourth highest COVID-19 death toll in the world.

The coronavirus mortality rate in the region is terrifying. Although it represents 10 percent of the world's population, Latin America accounts for one-third of all COVID-19 deaths. Peru has achieved the lamentable status as the country with the highest number of COVID-19 deaths per capita, with more than 30,000 deaths among a population of about 32 million. The global list of the ten countries with the highest rates of COVID-19 deaths per inhabitant also includes Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador.

This horrific toll is the result of absolutely criminal policies by capitalist governments in confronting the virus, combined with abysmal preexisting structural conditions.

Testing rates in the region are among the lowest in the world, precluding both contact tracing and realistic estimates of the spread of the virus. Mexico has conducted only 11,462 tests per million inhabitants and Argentina 32,816, according to *Worldometer*. The United States, which has far from an adequate testing level, has conducted 271,552 tests per million inhabitants.

Precarious health care systems, with doctors and nurses working without proper personal protective equipment,

resulted in severe rates of infection among health care workers. Mexico is the country with the highest number of health professionals killed by COVID-19 in the world, over 1,400. Brazil is fourth, with more than 600. Bolivia's Ministry of Health speaks of 200 health professionals killed, but there are estimates of four times that number.

The lack of infrastructure in hospitals, especially of adequate ventilators for COVID-19 treatment, has been aggravated by the criminal diversion of funds appropriated to fight the pandemic. Cases of government corruption, linked to gross overbilling for the purchase of health care equipment, have come to light in Brazil, Mexico, Bolivia and Ecuador.

In the face of school closures, which affected 165 million students throughout Latin America, governments were unable to provide adequate structures for distance learning. Only eight of the region's 33 countries have provided some technological devices to students. Among the poorest families in the region, only 10 to 20 percent have access to a computer, according to the United Nations Economic Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

The immense suffering caused by the disease has accelerated a brutal downgrading of the living conditions of large sections of Latin America's working masses. An ECLAC report points to an explosion of poverty in the region in 2020. More than a third of the population will face unemployment and food insecurity.

The official level of unemployment in Latin America will reach 13.5 percent by the end of the year, an increase of 5.4 percent compared to 2019. The total number of unemployed will increase from 26.1 million to 44 million. This is a massively higher impact than that recorded after the 2008 global financial crash, when unemployment increased by 0.6 percent, from 6.7 percent in 2008 to 7.3 percent in 2009.

The total number of Latin Americans living in poverty is expected to rise from 186 million to 231 million. “We calculated that eight out of 10 people in the region—and we’re talking about 491 million people—will live on an income that is up to three times the poverty line. And that means that 491 million people will live on under \$500 a month,” ECLAC executive secretary Alicia Bárcena told *Foreign Policy*.

The shock to the Latin American economy will produce a 9.1 percent contraction of its GDP by the end of 2020. The tourism sector alone has already suffered US\$230 billion in losses as borders closed. This is the equivalent of two-and-a-half times the GDP of a country like Bolivia.

While for Latin America’s working population the present period has spelled terrible privations, for the capitalist oligarchy it is a time of celebration. From March, when the pandemic hit the region, until July, the fortunes of 73 Latin American billionaires have grown by US\$48.2 billion, the international aid group Oxfam reported.

In Brazil, as nearly 10 million workers lost their jobs and millions more suffered deep wage cuts, the combined income of Brazil’s 42 billionaires grew from US\$123.1 billion to US\$157.1 billion. What this parasitic oligarchy accumulated over a five-month period of pandemic, US\$34 billion, is US\$11 billion more than the Brazilian government invested in health care in the whole of 2019.

The International Committee of the Fourth International defined the COVID-19 pandemic as a trigger event, which brought out the deep economic, social and political contradictions of the world capitalist system. Social inequality, a dominant feature of this system, is being exacerbated internationally and, in particular, in Latin America, the most unequal region on the planet.

At the same time, the international working class is manifesting its discontent with the situation in a growing wave of political radicalization. The mass protests against social inequality that took place in Chile and Ecuador between October and November of 2019 announced a political trend that will increasingly dominate the region and the world.

Latin American workers responded to the conditions imposed by the ruling elites and their governments in the face of the pandemic with a series of wildcat strikes in different sectors of the working class, from app delivery workers to nurses, which spread throughout the region, from Mexico to Brazil.

Workers and peasants took to the streets in Bolivia and

clashed with Jeanine Áñez’s coup regime, demanding its fall and an end to the hunger conditions imposed by its violent and disastrous quarantine. Revolts against hunger policies also broke out in Chile’s impoverished working-class neighborhoods.

This week, the murder of a worker by the Colombian police provoked the eruption of militant protests across the country. The brutal repression unleashed by the extreme-right government of President Iván Duque, leaving ten dead and hundreds wounded, has only increased popular anger.

The escalation of state violence is the desperate response of Latin American ruling elites to the growth of social conflicts that present themselves, more and more, as an open confrontation between two social classes with irreconcilable interests. On the one hand, there is a billionaire elite and its corrupt and violent states, and on the other, the working masses increasingly impoverished and dissatisfied with the prevailing social order.

In this battle, apparent bourgeois political antagonists such as Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, representative of the “Pink Tide” governments and an idol of the pseudo-left, join hands against the working class, spreading lies and disorganizing the fight against the pandemic, while forcing workers into contaminated workplaces to generate profits and guarantee the privileges of the capitalist oligarchy.

But the strength of the working class united as an independent political force is far greater. The fundamental question posed for the Latin American workers is the construction of a revolutionary leadership that unifies them among themselves and with their brothers and sisters internationally and leads them in struggle to overthrow the capitalist system and reorganize society based on socialist policies.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>