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Brazilian government hides scale of COVID-19 pandemic to promote criminal reopening

Leading the devastating growth of COVID-19 in Latin America, Brazil has surpassed 1,000,000 cases and 50,000 deaths according to its official figures. There has been a continuous increase in weekly averages of new cases and daily deaths since the first contamination was reported in March. Last Friday registered a record of 55,209 cases in a single day, as well as four days in a row with more than 1,200 deaths.

Despite this, the entire country has already adopted drastic policies to reopen economic activities, justified with baseless claims of a "stabilization" of the disease and of health care systems.



Workers protest after more than 50 tested positive in meat processing plant in Cabreúva, São Paulo Monday., [Credit: Facebook]

The virus's staggering toll is being minimized by political authorities as "below the highest projections," as stated by Patricia Ellen, the secretary of Economic Development of São Paulo, the most affected state in the country, which recorded a record 434 deaths in a single day this Tuesday.

But as frightening as they may be, official figures are a gross underestimate of reality, as Brazilian and international researchers have been warning for months.

On Monday, the World Health Organization (WHO) voiced concern about underreporting of cases in Brazil, revealed by the high percentage of positive results in COVID-19 tests, around 31 percent in Brazil, while in other countries it is usually 17 percent.

The official death toll has also been widely questioned. Researchers point, on the one hand, to an explosion in the number of deaths due to nonspecific severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and, on the other hand, to the profound differences between the total number of deaths due to natural causes in 2019 and 2020, that do not correspond to the numbers attributed to COVID-19. A report published by *Globo* last weekend reported that more than 21,000 deaths that have been registered as SARS are suspected cases of COVID-19.

Since February, the state of Minas Gerais has accumulated thousands of deaths registered as SARS and not tested for COVID-19. Based on these false figures, authorities decreed in late May the reopening of commerce in the capital Belo Horizonte. On that occasion, Mayor Alexandre Kalil of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) said it was not he who was reopening the city, but rather "doctors and science."

The result of this irresponsible reopening was the increase in the ICU bed occupancy rate in the city from 40 to 74 percent, which the "guardian of science" Kalil attributed to the sloppy use of masks and increasing numbers of barbecues.

Like Belo Horizonte, several other Brazilian cities have registered a high occupancy of hospital beds in recent weeks. In large cities of São Paulo's state interior, hospitals dedicated to COVID-19 have already reached full capacity and are refusing new admissions; the capital of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, has 100 percent of its COVID-19 beds occupied; treatment centers for COVID-19 in Curitiba, capital of Paraná, and Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul, have also reached full capacity.

On the other hand, in other cities and states, a decrease in the occupation of ICU beds has been presented by political leaders as a sign that the virus is under control. Researchers and medical authorities have also confronted this bald claim.

According to Domingos Alves, professor of the Medical School of the University of São Paulo, the decrease in occupation occurs “by the simple fact that the total number of available beds has been increased.” “There are governors and mayors who are resorting to this trick to say that the situation has improved and to reopen commercial activities, but when you look, the number of cases is increasing,” the doctor told *BBC* .

A survey conducted by the Brazilian Intensive Care Medicine Association’s “ICU Project” concluded the mortality rate of patients with the COVID-19 in public system units is of 38.5 percent, twice that of private health system units, with 19.5 percent.

This brutal difference is not linked, according to the researchers, so much to the difference in infrastructure between the two systems, as to the severity of the disease among patients who receive intensive care. In the public system, 66.5 percent of patients enter the ICU already requiring mechanical ventilation, while in the private system this number is 36.8 percent.

The policy of reopening the economy completely disregards science and follows a single criterion: the interests of capitalist profit. The main advocate of such measures is Brazil’s fascist President Jair Bolsonaro, who has been promoting a fierce campaign against any form of containment of the virus, which involves the spread of false cures such as hydroxychloroquine, while encouraging the breaking of quarantines and even the invasion of hospitals by his far-right supporters.

However, this criminal reopening policy has been embraced by all sectors of the Brazilian political establishment, including the so-called opposition of the Workers’ Party and its allies governing Northeastern states.

A study by Oxford University published this Monday analyzed the measures adopted in eight of the main Brazilian capitals—São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Recife, Fortaleza, Goiânia, Manaus and Porto Alegre—and concluded that they all reopened without meeting the basic requirements set by the WHO.

Besides the general lack of testing, Brazil is not carrying out any contact tracing measures, which would allow isolation of the virus. Speaking about the Brazilian situation, the WHO’s technical director, Maria Van Kerkhove, asked, “Where is the transmission happening? In health facilities, in nursing homes, related to specific events? It is necessary to have these details to control the virus.”

The answer to these questions is being blocked not only by the incompetence and neglect of the governments, but by their complacency in relation to the continuation of activities

tied to the transmission of the disease. As the *World Socialist Web Site* **reported** last week, the operation of meat processing plants and mining companies under unsafe conditions has caused contamination of entire cities.

New outbreaks of COVID-19 in dozens of workplaces throughout Brazil have been reported in just the last few days. These cases have received, at best, marginal attention from the media and are not presented as the generalized phenomenon they clearly have become.

The meatpacking industry continues to be the main scenario of new explosions. Last Friday, a JBS plant in Caxias do Sul, in Rio Grande do Sul, had 412 workers testing positive for the new coronavirus. The site had already been closed at the beginning of the month by the courts, after the confirmation of more than 20 infected workers, but it was reopened four days later and continues to operate now.

Another meat processing plant, in Cabreúva, in the countryside of São Paulo, was ordered closed by the Public Ministry of Labor (MPT) last week after the more than 50 workers tested positive and investigations revealed extremely risky working conditions, such as a lack of ventilation and crowded spaces. But the plant continued to operate with infected employees until workers held a **protest** on Monday, forcing its closure.

New outbreaks were also reported in Bradesco bank branches throughout the country. In Feira de Santana, Bahia, the MPT ordered the closure of the bank's branches, claiming that the management kept employees with symptoms of COVID-19 at work for days and, even after five of them tested positive, refused to adopt the minimum recommendations and prevented inspection of its facilities.

Last Friday, an explosion of coronavirus cases was reported at a Petrobras unit in Bahia. According to *Correio 24 Horas*, there are more than 200 infected workers at the Landulpho Alves refinery, most of them outsourced employees. One of them, 36 years old drill operator Johnny Mafort, died in mid-April.

Outbreaks at several Petrobras refineries and platforms are being deliberately covered up. Under the pretext of medical confidentiality, the number of workers killed by COVID-19 is not being revealed. Since May, the company's bulletins no longer disclose the infection rate among outsourced employees, excluding two thirds of the workers from its reports. Nevertheless, the number of cases confirmed up to June 15 exceeds 1,300.

Last week, *Estadão* reported that the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (Abin) has alerted the Bolsonaro administration of the accelerated spread of COVID-19 among Petrobras

workers since May. A major concern presented by Abin was that workers will react with a strike.

The strikes and protests at working places are the most powerful opposition to the antiscientific policies allowing the coronavirus to spread freely. This response has gained increasing appeal in different sectors of the Brazilian working class. Strikes against unsafe conditions are being carried out this week by health professionals in Piauí and Espírito Santo and by subway employees in Minas Gerais.

The movement in Brazil is directly connected to and strengthened by the growing opposition of workers around the world to the deadly policies advanced by capitalism. In recent days, the WSWP has reported strikes by autoworkers in Mexico and post office workers in England, responding to the contamination of their workplaces.

The pandemic is a global problem and can only be overcome by the collaboration among all countries. While capitalists defend their national “strategic interests” that prevent the effective fight against the virus, the global working class is defending common interests that transcend borders. The global unification of workers’ struggles around the program of overthrowing the capitalist system and implementing socialist policies emerges as the only way to defeat the pandemic and ensure the future of humanity.

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