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300,000 deaths in Brazil: A capitalist crime against humanity

Brazil surpassed the grim milestone of 300,000 COVID-19 deaths on Wednesday. In each of the country's states and regions, the Brazilian population has witnessed a brutal waste of lives, the result of the criminal indifference of its ruling elite.

We have yet to complete three full months of the year 2021, but in this brief period more than 100,000 Brazilians have lost their lives to COVID-19. The toll of the pandemic has escalated very rapidly since the year began, with the average number of daily infections jumping from 36,000 to more than 77,000. They are still on an upward trend, with a record of 100,158 infections recorded on Thursday.

The rampant advance of the virus throughout the country has provoked Brazil's "greatest health and hospital collapse in [its] history," according to the public health institution Fiocruz. Thousands of critically ill patients are waiting for an ICU bed on waiting lists that total approximately 900 people in Paraná, 750 in Greater São Paulo, 700 in Minas Gerais, 500 in Rio de Janeiro, 500 in Ceará, 400 in Goiás, and hundreds more in practically every state in Brazil.



Residents place roses on mattresses symbolizing COVID-19 victims, during a protest against the Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. (AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo)

Doctors are already being forced to choose who will receive treatment and who will be left to die. But there are imminent threats that the depletion of hospital supplies, including medical oxygen and intubation medications, will seriously compromise the ability to care for even those who have managed to secure a hospital bed.

The prospects for the coming weeks are terrifying. If immediate measures are not taken, researchers at Fiocruz have warned that Brazil will by April reach an average of 4,000 to 5,000 deaths per day.

But Brazil's catastrophe has an impact far beyond its national borders, which the coronavirus needs neither a passport nor a visa to cross. On Wednesday, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) warned of the devastating threat posed by the growing pandemic in Brazil to neighboring South American countries.

The regions in Venezuela, Peru, and Bolivia that border the northern part of Brazil have reported serious increases in cases in recent days. On Brazil's southern border, Paraguay is facing a hospital collapse, and Uruguay, which had exceptionally low numbers during the first wave of the pandemic, is suffering a rapid escalation of infections and deaths.

The efforts of the governments in these countries to wall off their populations with border controls and restrictions on the entry of Brazilians are seriously undermined by the deep cross-border integration of economic and social life. Moreover, the more infectious Brazilian P.1 COVID-19 variant, a major factor in the explosion of cases in Brazil, has already spread widely to neighboring countries, as well as to other parts of the world.

The failure to exert any control over the spread of the pandemic in Brazil has led not only to an accelerated reproduction of this virulent strain but is turning the country into an open-air laboratory for the generation of other COVID-19 mutations, and possibly even a new virus, an even more infectious and lethal SARS-CoV-3.

A recently published study by researchers at the Fiocruz COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Network identified relevant mutations in 11 sequences of SARS-CoV-2 coming from five different Brazilian states. The scientists conclude: “These findings support that the ongoing widespread transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in Brazil is generating new viral lineages that might be more resistant to neutralization than parental variants of concern.”

The ominous dangers posed to the Brazilian and world population by this catastrophic evolution of the disease are treated with the crudest contempt by Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro. He continues to pursue his government’s murderous herd immunity policy to its ultimate consequences, demanding that Brazilians stop “whining” about mass death and get back to work.

Bolsonaro is fighting to ensure that no measures to contain the spread of the virus conflict with the economic interests of Brazilian capitalism. Reaffirming his dictatorial threats, he warned that his government and his army are preparing “harsh measures” against any lockdown decree, in order to guarantee the “right of the people to work.”

To force workers into super-infected workplaces, he relies, above all, on the immense economic pressures placed upon the masses. The explosion of unemployment, rising food prices, and the cutting of emergency aid by the government is imposing unprecedented levels of social desperation upon every section of the working class.

According to Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) researcher Daniel Duque, over the past year, 22 million more Brazilians fell into poverty. Three out of 10 Brazilians are living

under some degree of food insecurity. In the *favelas*, the poor working class neighborhoods in Brazil's urban centers, 68 percent of residents have no money for food, as indicated by a poll from the Favelas United Center (CUFA).

The combination of unbearable economic hardship and the immeasurable suffering caused by the pandemic are fueling an explosive growth of social opposition in Brazil. In recent days, strikes and protests have broken out among teachers, oil workers, bus drivers, app delivery workers and other sections of the working class. Workers are demanding workplace safety, livable wages and political change.

Sensitive to this threat from below, sections of the capitalist elite fear that Bolsonaro's policies will provoke a social and economic explosion calling into question their class domination over society.

That position was exposed in an "open letter" by economists and businessmen criticizing Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic. Among its signatories are former ministers and former presidents of the Central Bank, the head of Brazil's biggest meatpacking corporation and the chairman of the board of Itaú Bank—the largest financial conglomerate in the Southern Hemisphere. Joining them was the author of the economic program of the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL).

The letter stated that "as long as the pandemic is not controlled by competent federal government action" the economic recession "will not be overcome." Its recommendation, repeated over and over, is that the government spend the least possible amount required to contain a social explosion.

Its first and central demand is the acceleration of the purchase and distribution of vaccines. Thus far only six percent of the population has received a first dose. The letter claims that "the vaccine cost-benefit ratio is on the order of six times for every Real spent on purchase and application." Next, it advocates the free distribution of masks and government encouragement of their use, affirming that it would have "a low cost compared to COVID-19 containment benefits."

While proclaiming that the "need for a lockdown must be evaluated," the letter expresses extreme concern about the "scope of activities covered" and its duration. It asserts that

“the best combination is one that maximizes the benefits in terms of reducing virus transmission and minimizes economic effects.” The same standard is applied to financial aid, which should be lean and focused on the most affected sectors of the population.

The letter also makes a virulent attack on school closures, claiming that the criminal experience of reopening schools in São Paulo, which caused thousands of infections of educators and students and dozens of deaths, was proof of the “relatively low level of infection in schools.”

This supposed opposition within the ruling class to Bolsonaro is a complete fraud. None of what is proposed guarantees an effective containment of the pandemic. While posing cosmetic differences with Bolsonaro’s policies, this program is founded upon the same hostility to the determinations of science and the interests of preserving lives.

This same essential program finds political expression in the rotten alliance, widely celebrated in the bourgeois media, between the Workers Party (PT) and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), the traditional party of the Brazilian right, materialized in the National Governors Forum. The governors represented in this body have kept all economic activities open in their states and promoted the homicidal reopening of schools. With the single difference that they do not attack the use of masks and vaccines, as Bolsonaro does, they bear the same criminal responsibility for the COVID-19 disaster in Brazil.

This is also, fundamentally, the program of the trade unions, which has acted as arms of the corporations to keep them operating regardless of the risks to workers and society as a whole. The unions have systematically sabotaged workers’ struggles for the closure of businesses and schools. These organizations have also responded with nervousness to agitation among their ranks and, like the bourgeois sector behind the “open letter,” demanded the acceleration of vaccinations for their workers so that capitalist exploitation can return to normal.

Combating the catastrophe created by the pandemic requires an independent working class program, which points in a radically different direction.

Instead of a partial lockdown, based upon a cost-benefit analysis weighing profits against human lives, the working class must fight for a shutdown of all activities that are non-essential to society. Those activities that are maintained should operate under workers' control and with the aid of scientists and health professionals to ensure workers' safety. A full income—not starvation bonuses—must be provided for all working families.

The implementation of this program is required to save the lives not only of working people in Brazil, but of their class brothers and sisters all over the planet.

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic proves the necessity of the abolition of the capitalist nation-state system. The struggles of the workers in Brazil must be united with those of the international working class to stop the spread of the coronavirus and to implement socialist measures, including the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and the ending of private ownership of the means of production to make way for a scientifically organized and democratically controlled world economy that places human lives over profit.

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