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Mass demonstrations erupt across Brazil as COVID deaths pass 500,000 mark

On Saturday, Brazil saw a second round of national mass protests against the government of fascist President Jair Bolsonaro and his response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The demonstrations were even larger than those that took place last May 29, this time gathering, according to their organizers, 750,000 people across the capitals of every state as well as dozens of other Brazilian cities, and even in other countries.

What brought hundreds of thousands into the streets was graphically expressed by the grim milestone of 500,000 deaths from COVID-19 reached by Brazil also on Saturday. The staggering number of deaths from by the pandemic is the result of a conscious policy of social murder that continues in full swing.



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Demonstrators protest against Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic on Paulista Avenue, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Saturday, June 19, 2021. (AP Photo/Marcelo Chello)

Since the beginning of 2021, Brazil has experienced an overwhelming wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths. More than 300,000 deaths and 10 million cases were recorded in the first six months of this year alone.

This explosion of infections was driven, first, by the widespread adoption of the policy of total reopening of economic activities and schools in opposition to the recommendations of public health experts and serving the interests of capitalist profit. Also, an important factor was the spread of the more contagious P.1 variant of the coronavirus, which appeared in Amazonas, itself a terrible product of the ruling class's experiments with herd immunity.

The wild spread of the coronavirus caused the overflow of intensive care units in every Brazilian state, leading to "the greatest health and hospital collapse in the history of Brazil," according to the public health institution Fiocruz. Between the end of March and the beginning of April, the country reached averages of more than 3,000 deaths per day and set a record of 4,200 deaths in a single day.

The mass deaths and the inhumane conditions to which many patients were subjected—dying while waiting for an ICU bed or suffocating from lack of medical oxygen—had a strong impact on the consciousness of large sections of the Brazilian population. At Saturday's protests, once again, many of the demonstrators carried placards bearing the names of relatives and friends who died from COVID-19, deaths that they blame directly on Bolsonaro's homicidal policy.

The uncontrolled pandemic in Brazil has had a murderous impact on its neighbors in South America. Uruguay, for example, on Brazil's southern border, after a relatively controlled first wave in 2020, has had an explosion of cases driven by the P.1 variant and a reopening policy that led the country in April to the highest number of daily deaths per capita in all of South America. Countries such as Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela, bordering Brazil to the west and north, have also seen their cases soar as a result of the Brazilian variant.

Colombia and Paraguay, countries which have also been rocked by mass protests in opposition to their governments' disastrous handling of the pandemic, are experiencing horrific hospital collapses that doctors largely attribute to difficulties in handling the new Brazilian variant.

After some weeks of decreasing cases and deaths, Brazil is once again experiencing a new rise in numbers. The country is in an extremely critical moment of the pandemic's development. Institutions such as Fiocruz and leading scientists claim that Brazil is now entering a potentially more devastating third wave of the pandemic.

In an interview last week with *O Globo*, neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis, who had precisely predicted that Brazil would reach averages of more than 4,000 deaths per day and surpass 500,000 deaths by July, once again warned that if measures are not immediately taken to strictly shut down economic activities and effectively control the virus, "We will pass the US and become the country with the highest number of deaths from COVID-19 in the world, even though we have a smaller population."

Describing the current situation in Brazil, Nicolelis cited as critical factors: the "hospital collapse that has not been remedied," the "multiple variants of the virus entering the country," the slow progress of vaccinations, and the relaxation of isolation measures, grotesquely symbolized by the hosting of the Copa América soccer tournament in the country.

All the malignant elements of the political response to the pandemic that caused 500,000 deaths in Brazil and countless others across the continent continue to be criminally implemented by the Brazilian ruling elite.

The fascistic Bolsonaro, with his sociopathic calls for the continuation of the economic reopening regardless of how many deaths it causes, expresses this policy most bluntly. But no political party in Brazil's political establishment offers a consistent alternative to the bleak prospects of the pandemic foretold by Nicolelis and other scientists.

This has been exposed by the total failure of the states governed by the Workers Party (PT) and its allies the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) and Communist Party of Brazil

(PCdoB) to control the pandemic. Instead, all of them have continued to promote the unsafe reopening of economic activities and schools.

The mass demonstrations that have taken place in the last weeks in Brazil express the growth of an uncontrollable social opposition in the country. In response, the so called opposition to Bolsonaro within the political establishment is desperately trying to deflect this anger from clashing with the capitalist political system.

The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) set up to investigate the government's handling of the pandemic is striving to present itself as a definitive settling of scores with the crimes committed by the Brazilian state over the past year. Leading members of the CPI have published a note in response to the surpassing of 500,000 deaths (clearly in response to the pressure from mass protests). It states, "We did not arrive at this devastating, inhumane picture by chance. There are guilty elements and they, as far as the CPI is concerned, will be exemplarily punished."

At the same time, the PT and its allies who called for the demonstrations on May 29 and on Saturday are struggling to divert these protests into empty appeals to the state, subordinating them to a political alliance with the most reactionary forces of the bourgeoisie to replace Bolsonaro.

Last Saturday's protests were marked, in addition to the increased number of demonstrators, by increased efforts by their leaders to turn them into political rallies aimed at preparing for the 2022 elections.

Former President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva of the PT, who is being promoted as the most likely candidate to confront Bolsonaro in the next elections, publicly considered participating in the demonstrations. Although, in a staged maneuver, he stayed away in order not to turn "a political act into an electoral act." Instead, he sent for this very purpose the PT's Fernando Haddad, who lost the 2018 presidential elections to Bolsonaro.

Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) leader Guilherme Boulos, who is intimately involved in the PT's electoral maneuvers and the forging of alliances with right-wing political forces against Bolsonaro, was also present and speaking at the demonstration in São Paulo.

In addition to the presence of the PT, with its leaders and supporters holding flags, Saturday's demonstrations also had a participation by the Unified Workers Central (CUT—which is controlled by the PT), and other trade union federations, which this time formally backed the protests.

The participation of the unions was an apprehensive response to the growth of a political opposition within the working class, which these reactionary organizations subordinated to capitalism are desperately trying to suppress.

This was exposed by the bureaucratic maneuvers by the unions to demobilize workers on the eve of the protests. On June 18, the day before the demonstrations, the unions called for a “national day of mobilization in workplaces.” The “mobilization” was a complete fraud. Despite the immense attacks faced by workers, which fueled recent struggles in different sections of the working class, the unions openly refused to advocate a strike on this day.

The president of the Union Force (Força Sindical—the second largest federation in Brazil) Miguel Torres, said to *Carta Capital* that the “strike issue is very controversial.” Torres declared that “he doesn't see conditions for a strike, because of the pandemic, the high unemployment and the contract suspensions.” That is, the very issues pushing workers into struggle preclude any action!

The unions are continuing what they have systematically done throughout the pandemic: collaborating to keep workplaces open, sabotaging workers' strikes and struggles, and forcing them to continue producing profits for the capitalist class regardless of the deadly dangers posed by the pandemic.

This reactionary role of the unions is joined with the efforts of the PT, the PSOL and their pseudo-left satellites to prevent the social opposition from developing on a path capable of truly confronting the COVID-19 pandemic and the social problems of the working class, which involves confronting the interests of the capitalist class and its state.

These political forces strive to prevent Brazilian workers from recognizing the identity of their interests with those of their class brothers and sisters throughout Latin America and internationally.

A scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be effective within the framework of a single country. Both the fight to stop the coronavirus, which crosses borders without the need for a passport, and an effective campaign to vaccinate the entire population are essentially global questions. Their realization is impossible without a struggle against the capitalist nation-state system and private property, and without the advance of socialist policies.

This political task requires the independent political mobilization of the working class led by a revolutionary socialist and internationalist party, a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

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