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Brazil and pandemic

Brazil's workers strike for the right to quarantine

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Although not yet at the top of the Covid-19 international headlines, Brazil may soon emerge as one of the disaster's epicenters. A deadly combination of social inequality, racism and sexism, vicious state repression, and a Trumpian far-right president is putting hundreds of thousands at risks. But Brazil's working-class and social movement are fighting to defend themselves, striking for the right to quarantine. Here, Brazilian socialists respond to No Borders News questions as part of our ongoing international Covid-19 coverage. [NBN, 23 March 2020.]

No Borders News: Briefly describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Silvia Ferreira/Waldo Mermelstein: The pandemic is growing exponentially in Brazil, currently doubling each 2 and a half days, that is, similar to the rate in Italy several weeks ago. As of today, we have 1546 infected people (nearly 40% of them in state of SÃ£o Paulo), and 25 deaths, but the real number of cases cannot be accurately estimated and monitored due to the absolute lack of widespread testing. Experts say that it could spread much more rapidly due to the lack of early measures, the partial quarantines limited to only some states, and Brazil's social conditions.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

SF/WM: President Jair Bolsonaro has been in deep denial, early on decrying social apprehension as "hysteria." He even dared to go to a right-wing demonstration on March 15, touching and embracing people, even though several members of his personal staff were already sick. The result of Bolsonaro's indifference — combined with the visible economic effects in the real economy (the country's GDP was expected to decrease up to 4% this year before the Covid-19 crisis began— is intense criticism aimed at the central government from the main political parties, including the president of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house). Therefore, the federal government currently has its worst approval rating since it took office, 41% strongly disapproving and 25% supporting it. The Health Ministry did finally adopt belated measures such as spreading basic information about how to prevent the contagion.

Meanwhile, local and state governments have taken the lead and last week started to recommend social distancing, closing all schools, restriction the functioning of non-essential businesses in some states, but as of today, no such decision has been made from the national government in Brasilia. However, even local and state governments have not adopted the approach of "locking down" as applied by other countries, such as China and Italy, and recently Argentina. The general official approach, until now, has failed to massively distribute sanitizers and masks to the population, likewise, there is no massive testing underway.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

SF/WM: The president used his public speeches to put his denial of the tragic dimensions of the epidemic on display, and has not opted for massive testing to follow the evolution of the epidemic in order to detect the main areas of contagion. Only several thousands of people have been tested, those presenting with severe symptoms at hospitals. At the same time, the president is criticizing and undermining some more restrictive measures adopted by state

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governors (such as those of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the very epicenter of the epidemic), calling them “lunatic,” and decrying measures already adopted to close non-essential public activities as “job killers.” There are no complete quarantines in any part of the country, nor any measures to distribute masks and sanitizers to the population at no cost, items which have almost disappeared from the markets.

Brazil has a very important basic public health structure, created in 1989, after the end of the dictatorship, with nearly 40 thousand primary care centers. These could be used to prevent overcrowding hospitals and emergency centers. But this system has been severely underfunded in the last decades, and in 2017 things became worse with the passing of a Constitutional Amendment (EC95) that froze all social investments for the following 20 years in the name of austerity, affecting especially the most isolated and/or destitute populations. Making matters much worse, we must stress that Brazil is the seventh most unequal country in the world: two-thirds of its population earning less than 2 minimum wages (the current value of the minimum wage is approximately 200 U.S. dollars per month), 6% of the population live in slums (the favelas), and 50% of the population does not have indoor plumbing.

Therefore, the impact of the epidemic in the context of an economy that was already entering recession before this health crisis will be disastrous. On the other hand, large-scale investment in the public health system, combined with the nationalization of the private health system, and the immediate hiring of thousands of people to work directly in the communities using the public health system's primary care facilities could be a powerful tool to combat the disease.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

SF/WM: The president has spent his time denying the urgency of a national response, and attacking other initiatives by local governments, and, as of today, has not taken any measure to quarantine the people and save millions of lives. On the other hand, the government rushed to help big companies with billions of reais (Brazil's currency), authorizing them to reduce their employees' wages by up to 50%, while promising merely a three-month bonus of 200 reais (nearly U\$40.00) for precarious workers who amount more than 20 million people.

Local and state governments have suspended many activities, such as in São Paulo, which is governed by a neoliberal, rightwing party (Brazilian Social Democracy Party – PSDB) that suspended all non-essential businesses, but did not declare a total quarantine, which is the only way of sparing untold lives.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

SF/WM: The main struggle of the unions today is that workers in all sectors must have the right to quarantine, without losing their wages. University classes have been suspended and teachers sent home, along with all university workers. In public schools, winter holidays were approaching so teachers are receiving their salaries. But subcontracted workers in the schools were laid off as they are not regular public employees. Private schools are now attending online classes. However, there are other sectors fighting for the same right.

Metalworkers are negotiating to stop the factories and to not have any reduction of their salaries or layoffs. In the Cherry car factory in São José dos Campos, workers mobilized and managed to revoke dismissals. Metro workers in São Paulo demanded that workers over the age of 60 be allowed to self-quarantine along with those who have pre-existing conditions or diseases or are in high risk groups. At the same time, they are still struggling to reduce the flow of in-service trains.

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The construction industry has not laid off their workers, but several unions are fighting for the right to cease work without financial losses, as was the case in Fortaleza, and in the state of Ceara, where workers won 15 days off. But the reality is that the majority of workers still do not have the right to quarantine, including bank and call center workers. These last groups were protesting last week in front of company headquarters in São Paulo, demanding not to be included as essential labor and, therefore, allowed to leave work.

The children of domestic and daily workers are struggling for bosses to release their parents from their duties without withholding wages. One example shows why. A domestic worker in Rio de Janeiro died from a coronavirus infection that she caught from her boss who had returned from Italy yet refused to allow her domestic worker to be released from the job. In Brazil, there are nearly 6.3 million domestic workers.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

SFWM: At this moment, there is a mobilization and campaign organized in indigenous villages, led by the APIB (Association of Brazilian Indigenous Peoples) for resources to buy medicines and food to supplies for their villages. The central trade union federations and the Fearless People's Front (Frente Povo Sem Medo) and Brazil's Popular Front, who cancelled street demonstrations against the government set to occur on March 18, are supporting and calling for pot banging protests that are taking place almost every night at 8 pm as thousands hang out their windows and balconies in neighborhoods of the big state capitals to voice their opposition to Bolsonaro. Meanwhile, the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) is demanding the suspension of all foreclosures and land repossession operations.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

SFWM: Several popular movements in the poor neighborhoods and the Black movement are collecting food and medicines for people who work without a formal labor contract or are unemployed. These groups are demanding the government pay one minimum wage to each of them instead of the infamous 200 reais promised by Bolsonaro.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

SFWM: A new political situation has emerged in Brazil. There is growing social unrest against Bolsonaro's ludicrous statements and his complete lack of ability to lead the country in the midst of its biggest social and health challenge ever. This process may evolve in different directions, ranging from the establishment of an informal parliamentary regime (unofficially pushing Brazil's president aside), the impeachment of the president, or a sort of coup d'état granting more power to Bolsonaro. The combination of the epidemic with the impending economic and social crises and the ultra-neoliberal policies undertaken by the central government may create even more complicated and explosive scenarios in the coming weeks and months.

Source [No Borders News](#).

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