

The Americas: new centre of the pandemic

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While in Europe, outside Russia, the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be slowing down, at least for the time being, the situation on the American continent and in the Caribbean is very critical. In a statement by the Pan American Health Organisation, PAHO, the region was described as the new epicentre of the crisis. At the time, on 18 May, there were over 2 million infected people tested on the continent, with a weekly increase of 14 percent. Only Canada and Cuba had reached a "flattening of the curve" by then. The continental centres of the epidemic; the USA, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Chile are still in the growth zone, sometimes doubling within a week.

While the financial and systemic means to contain the crisis would actually be available in the USA, the countries to the south are obviously far more threatened by the medical and economic consequences of the pandemic wave. Even though three quarters of the (officially tested) infected people currently live in the US, the immediate challenge for health systems and anti-pandemic measures in these countries is many times greater. Brazil, with 350,000 infected persons today, is currently second only to the US in the world but, relative to the population, the infection rate in Peru, Chile and Ecuador is much higher. However, the Brazilian health system is already working at the limit: in mid-May, the intensive care units in Sao Paulo were already 91 percent full, and in Fortaleza and Manaus they were even overloaded. The same applies to the hotspots in Peru and Mexico. Even much richer Chile is now reporting a danger of congestion in the conurbations.

Unequal distribution

In addition, there are great social and ethnic differences in the distribution of the infection. In Latin America, one in two wage earners works in the informal sector - a lockdown therefore means immediate unemployment without social security. Since many sectors of the American economy have also been operating in austerity mode since the beginning of April, there is now a great deal of pressure to accept any possible work despite the risk of infection. Even the emergency support measures adopted in many countries are themselves leading to overcrowding at distribution points. In addition, there are living conditions, especially in the informal sector, which turn every appeal for "social distancing" into a farce, not to mention issues of sanitary and hygienic conditions. In a mass test at one of the large street markets in Lima, 80 percent of the traders tested positive. The different access to medical care and such random samples suggest that the actual number of infected people, and probably also of victims, is many times higher than the official figures. In view of the economic situation, many of those affected have no choice but to continue working despite all the symptoms and thus ensure the unchecked spread of the virus.

In addition, there are also populations that are at especially high risk, such as the 2,400 indigenous population groups in the Amazon region. Already today there are officially more than 20,000 tested Covid-19 cases with a much higher mortality rate than in other areas. The people lack basic medical care. In addition, immunity to certain diseases is often lower among the indigenous population due to their relative isolation from 'civilisation'. The PAHO fears the extinction of entire ethnic groups if aid is not provided. The

passivity of certain governments on this problem is worryingly reminiscent of the genocide that European immigrants caused among the pre-Columbian population of America.

In addition to the acute pandemic crisis, there is a justified concern that the necessary medical resources will pass them by. This concerns not only the supply of urgently needed ventilators, intensive care beds, funds for medical personnel and the necessary protective clothing. It also concerns the supplies of the pharmaceutical industry. While in some countries there are even people demonstrating against vaccines that are not yet available, in the global South there is more concern that the medicines and vaccines will be delivered primarily to where the big money is. Several Latin American countries and the PAHO have therefore called for the creation of a fund to meet the medical needs needed to combat the pandemic in the region. The US\$ 4 billion that the IMF has so far allocated to Latin America and the Caribbean as emergency aid appears to be no more than a drop in the ocean.

Economic distortions

It is clear that almost all Latin American countries have been in an economic crisis situation for several years now, Argentina is even on the verge of the next national bankruptcy. The lockdown, the collapse of world trade and the recession that is now following, are further exacerbating the problems of stagnation, inflation and national debt. Since the cooling of the global economy since 2016, capital has been flowing out of the region on a large scale. There is already a lack of capital for investments and necessary infrastructure measures everywhere.

As the debt problems, such as in Argentina, for example, intensify, the outflow of capital can even be expected to accelerate. While the ECB and the EU institutions in Europe are saying that they have "enough money" to put trillions into "reconstruction programmes", without saying who will actually have to pay for it in the end, Latin America does not live in a "whatever it takes" region, to paraphrase Mario Draghi. Even if rescue funds were to come from the IMF and the World Bank, they would certainly not come without conditions and further austerity programmes. A further sinking of the economies into stagnation and inflation, indeed, into a severe economic depression, is therefore considered very likely.

Bleak outlook

Given these prospects for pandemic development and economic crisis, the political situation in Latin America is no less bleak. The escapades of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro are well known around the world. Not only has he systematically torpedoed the disease control measures, in the meantime he has already got through several health ministers who did not want to follow him, and publicly ridiculed the health risks. He uses the crisis more and more openly to push forward racist and right-wing reactionary mobilisations, to take action against political opponents in an increasingly threatening manner and apparently to enforce a policy of accepting the pandemic among the poorer population, especially among blacks and indigenous people. His main concern is that the white elite retains its privileges and does not need to worry about "restrictions on freedom".

But "left-wing" populists, like Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, ?AMLO?, also play down the scale of the pandemic crisis. AMLO recently declared that the virus had been "defeated" and that the economy, especially in the production chains for the USA, could be fully revived. This, despite the fact that even the apparently falsified low figures from government agencies clearly show a further increase in the trend of the region. Venezuela's healthcare system had already virtually collapsed before the pandemic and is currently unable to cope with the growing number of infections. Nevertheless, it is still cheerfully stated that everything is under control.

In fact, this can only be said of Cuba where, despite all the austerity measures, the health system has still functioned adequately by Latin American standards and the disease control measures have been

consistently implemented. However, the economic slump, in part due to the ending of tourism, leads to a threatening supply situation. The "export" of doctors and the stimulation of the domestic pharmaceutical industry are therefore by no means purely humanitarian acts, but, above all, vital foreign exchange earners for the financing of necessary food imports.

The intensified political crisis in Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia before the pandemic has receded into the background for the moment. However, the worsening of the health and economic crisis will cause the reactionary forces currently in power there to take far more authoritarian measures. At the same time, however, the current developments in Chile show that there can and will be hunger revolts and mass mobilisations on the continent, which can and will put a class-struggle, even revolutionary, response on the agenda.

Alternative

In the face of this combined political, economic and epidemiological threat that is rolling towards the working masses in Latin America, it is more necessary than ever to also organise on a continental level and to combine the resistance against the approaching catastrophe with the struggle for a socialist alternative. All three threats are obviously not simply national and they cannot be fought on a national scale. Bolivar's dream of a Latin American republic was already in his time a bold idea in view of the balance of power, today it can only be realised if the working masses recognise that only the workers in alliance with all oppressed layers of the population will be able to push through a real alternative the United Socialist States of Latin America! Socialism or barbarism is the alternative.

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