

# Brazil: The Covid-19 crisis and the challenges for the working class

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An economic crisis in Brazil was already sharpening during President Rousseff's first term but, with the coup that brought her down, the crisis got even worse and also became a political crisis. Since then the country's situation has been getting worse and worse, with major attacks on the working class, such as labour and social security ?reforms?.

When the civil servants at all levels (Federation, States, Municipal) were organising for a large movement throughout the country to stoop the reform of state administration, the Coronavirus pandemic hit the country. The central unions immediately suspended the action scheduled for March 18, for fear of large-scale transmission of the virus.

Fulfilling the demands of the capitalists, the government issued Provisional Measure 927, which included allowing the suspension of employment contracts for up to 4 months. This met with a very negative response in the media and even in the Congress, causing the government to withdraw the particular article that guaranteed this attack. However, other attacks on workers leading to the withdrawal of the rights of those in formal employment in the country, such as guaranteeing the presence of unions in contractual negotiations, were maintained. This possibility leaves the worker at the mercy of the bosses, expected to sign "agreements" that can withdraw rights and even reduce wages. Congress should reject this Provisional Measure without any further consideration. It is already clear to us that Coronavirus is being used as a pretext to withdraw workers' rights.

A "gripezinha? (little flu)

The Bolsonaro government, in an illogical and criminal manner, treats the pandemic as if it were just another simple flu, a ?gripezinha", in the words of Bolsonaro. Even with several members of his government contaminated, he insists on disqualifying preventive actions. This was made very clear at the rally that he himself called in support of his government against Congress and the Federal Supreme Court (STF) on March 15. At that moment he was under quarantine (suspected to be infected) and yet he left the palace to greet and embrace his supporters there.

The pandemic has advanced across the country. In most cities, much has come to a standstill. All commercial activities, except markets and pharmacies, are closed. Gyms, libraries, public and private schools are also closed. The recommendation is not to leave home. But workers in industries that have not been closed and continue to work are at risk of becoming infected. Public transport shows its own shortages. With the decrease in the flow of people, most companies are working fewer hours and with a smaller fleet, in the case of buses. This means that, at peak times, public transport is too crowded, which further increases the risk of contamination.

Residents of the suburbs and favelas were practically abandoned. There is no programme designed for them to contain the pandemic. In a video on the website of the newspaper Estadão, on youtube, a community leader from the Paraisópolis favela in São Paulo denounced their abandonment by the authorities and took the initiative to organise the favelas. There are 420 local leaders, each responsible for specific streets. In these streets, each one of them has contact with about 300 residents. Thus, they understand the situation in the favela, they have formed food distribution teams and are improvising places to take care of residents in which the disease manifests itself. This is an example of how to organise, not only to fight the pandemic, but also to defend their democratic rights that are disrespected daily by the state itself.

On March 24, President Bolsonaro, on national television, in opposition to specialists and world health authorities, once again played down the pandemic and called on the Brazilian people to come out of social isolation, calling for a "return to normality" and an end to "confinement". He also stated that "the media? are responsible for spreading the fear.

April is expected to be the peak month for Coronavirus transmission in Brazil and the Minister of Health himself already predicts a collapse in the health system, that could show a similar situation as in Italy. Brazil to date, (03/30), has a record of 159 dead and 4,579 infected, with a death rate of 3.5% (El País, 03/31/2020).

Unfortunately, little imagination is required to realise that the Bolsonaro government is only concerned with defending the interests of entrepreneurs and bankers, trying to save an economy that has already gone to the dogs.

Capitalism: a mortal danger

Faced with this framework, we must guarantee the democratic rights that were already threatened and which are now being attacked more rapidly through Provisional Measures and Decrees. The capitalist class and its representative, the Bolsonaro government, want and will burden the masses with the burdens of the crisis and therefore also with the risks of the pandemic. We must not passively accept the general restriction of democratic rights. Instead, we should use these hard-won rights to implement an effective programme to combat the pandemic. The fight for our health is closely linked to the fight against the spread of the economic crisis. To be successful, it is not enough to limit our demands to immediate measures to combat the disease. We must also focus on the social causes that make the virus so dangerous. It is no accident that the fight against the disease requires determined action against exploitation and the market economy. More than ever, it is clear that capitalism itself has become a deadly danger to humanity.

The right to strike, meet and demonstrate must be defended. We are against any measures that pass on the costs of the crisis to workers and that discriminate against or exclude those oppressed by race. We also need every means to fight. If we want to ensure that millions of people do not lose their wages and rights, we will have to fight - neither the government nor capital will make concessions to us. So, we need organisation on a much bigger scale to defend our interests. We need bodies to fight, such as action councils and workers' control committees, that are democratically organised and accountable to their grassroots.

The internet based social media offer possibilities to break the isolation of people, at least partially. Workers and trade unionists, campaigns and political initiatives can also use these media to network, hold audio and video conferences, and even people who are being forced to work in companies, and informal workers can also coordinate their activities at work, taking into account safety instructions.

In the face of this chaotic situation, working class organisations, trade union centres, confederations, federations and trade unions must defend the following measures:

- ? Defend the rights we have already won!
- ? Immediate repeal of EC 95, which stipulates a limit for public service expenditure;
- ? Revocation of the Law of Fiscal Responsibility, which under normal conditions already limits expenditures with public servants;
- ? Against MP 927, it must not be passed in the Senate;
- ? Immediate suspension of all non-essential works and extension of work at distance;
- ? Stability and full payment of wages for formal workers, including those removed by quarantine, for as long as the effects of the pandemic persist;
- ? A minimum wage income for all informal, unemployed, self-employed workers as well as for small business owners (shops, restaurants and others) who need to remain closed for the time being;
- ? Suspension of payment of bills and of cuts in public services (water and sewage, energy, telephone and internet), in addition to the payment of other expenses such as rents, health plans, public transportation, loans and financing, for the duration of the crisis;
- ? Emergency plan for public health care in the favelas, suburbs and the settlements of the MST and MTST;
- ? Free health services for everyone - from tests to hospital accommodation and intensive care;
- ? Strengthening SUS (National Health Service). Increase production of drugs, test kits, disinfectants, respiratory protection to combat the pandemic, provision of information to the population, and recruitment of medical personnel and assistants, under the control of unions and workers;
- ? Abolition of trade secrets and all research results from state and private institutes; international coordination of efforts to develop a vaccine that is available to all people free of charge;
- ? Nationalisation without compensation of the private sectors of the health, pharmaceutical and medical technology industries, in order to gather resources and place them under the control of workers and their unions;
- ? Suspension of all work and activities that are not necessary to maintain basic services for the population. These activities must be defined by the working population, not by the owners of capital and their governments;
- ? Unconditional payment of wages for all workers whose work is suspended;
- ? Additional payments for all those working in health and other areas who have to continue to work with health risk. If companies refuse to comply with these measures, they must be expropriated without compensation;
- ? No to the suspension of workers' rights by Provisional Measures, decrees and/or by decision of the companies themselves through the requirement of overtime, working from home, work on Saturdays or Sundays, transfers, etc;
- ? Against the withdrawal of workers' rights. It is necessary to form control committees in companies and in all sectors, which control all the measures of the authorities and companies and, if necessary, veto them;
- ? Expropriation of large construction companies. Immediate expropriation of vacant housing in order to make it available to those that are in need;
- ? Do not close the borders! Migrants should undergo medical examinations like everyone else and, in case of infection, should receive medical and social care;
- ? Cancellation of the debts of semi-colonial countries. Support for the massive construction of medical facilities in them, paid for with the extra profits of corporations and imperialist states;
- ? Coordination of all research and development efforts rather than competition for faster profits. Vaccine research and development should be taken out of the control of private companies, individual countries or economic blocs. All research and results should be publicly available on the internet. An international

committee of experts should coordinate decisions about which teams to conduct which research and development;

? Taxation of the great wealth and profits of companies and banks to finance these measures. The working class, which is already exploited on a daily basis, will not be able to pay for this crisis.

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