

Brazil faces new wave of the pandemic amid shortage of COVID-19 vaccines

Fátima Ferrante, Guilherme Ferreira
13 September 2024

Amid a new wave of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world, Brazil has seen a consistent increase in the number of cases of the novel coronavirus in recent weeks. It is the second wave of the pandemic this year in the country.

According to hugely underestimated data from the Ministry of Health of the government of Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party - PT), deaths from COVID-19 rose from 229 in July to 334 in August, while cases more than doubled in that period, from 17,964 to 36,970. This increase was also identified by the Todos pela Saúde Institute (ITpS), which saw the positivity rate reach 23 percent in mid-August, an increase of 10 percentage points in one month.

In September, cases continued to rise. Data released on Thursday showed that the number of COVID-19 cases increased from 7,180 in the epidemiological week of August 25 to 31 to 16,722 from September 1 to 7, while the number of deaths decreased from 89 to 62 in the same period. In total, Brazil has 38.9 million cases and 713,000 deaths from COVID-19.

The last two InfoGripe bulletins, published by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) on September 5 and 12, also pointed to a long-term upward trend in cases and, consequently, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 17 of Brazil's 27 states, particularly "due to the high movement of people between the state of São Paulo [Brazil's most populous and one of the hotspots of the current wave] and other regions of the country."

The InfoGripe bulletin of September 12 also pointed to a higher incidence of COVID-19 cases and deaths caused by SARS. It reported that 32 percent of cases and 52 percent of deaths from SARS in the last four epidemiological weeks were caused by COVID-19, much higher than those caused by Respiratory Syncytial Virus (9 percent and 4 percent), Influenza A (14 percent and 25 percent) and Influenza B (3 percent and 4 percent).

According to the Ministry of Health, so far in 2024 there have been around 112,000 hospitalizations and 7,000 deaths from SARS, 25 percent of which were from COVID-19.

COVID-19, however, is much more than a respiratory syndrome. There is growing evidence of the debilitating effect that SARS-CoV-2 can have on various organs and systems of

the body well after the initial infection, a condition also known as Long COVID.

In a mid-July interview with *Intercept Brasil*, Monica de Bolle, a senior researcher at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and an expert in immunology, said: "SARS-CoV-2 is a systemic virus. It has been characterized by respiratory disease, so the lay population understands that it is a respiratory virus, but SARS-CoV-2 is not a pure and simple respiratory virus, it lodges anywhere in our body."

This, in turn, has been completely ignored by the Lula government. According to de Bolle, "There is nothing in Brazil, nothing that the MS [Ministry of Health] has done, to take care of these people [with Long COVID] properly. There's even a lack of training because SUS [National Health System] physicians won't necessarily know how to identify Long COVID."

With unimpeded circulation, new variants of the novel coronavirus have emerged and spread throughout Brazil and the world. In recent months, the global increase in cases has been driven by the KP.2 and KP.3 variants, which have been dubbed FLiRT variants, in reference to mutations at important sites in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, which make them more transmissible.

The variants KP.2 and KP.3 descend from the variant of concern JN.1, which was responsible for the global wave of cases in late 2023 and early 2024, including in Brazil. In recent months, the LB.1 variant, which also descends from JN.1, has started to spread around the world. In Brazil, it has already overtaken JN.1, with data from the last quarter (May, June and July) showing that LB.1 accounts for 34 percent of cases.

That COVID-19 is still a cause for concern in this fifth year of the pandemic testifies to the total failure of capitalist governments and ruling elites around the world to offer a scientific response to a virus whose effects can be debilitating even for high-performance athletes, as was recently seen at the Paris Olympics.

In Brazil, the Lula government has deepened the "COVID forever" policy of fascistic ex-president Jair Bolsonaro. Since taking office at the beginning of last year, he has abandoned the most basic measures to monitor the pandemic, such as mass testing and monitoring the presence of SARS-CoV-2 in sewage

water. Meanwhile, the government continues to misinform the population about the scientific aspects of the pandemic and to carry out a vaccination campaign against COVID-19 that has been a complete fiasco.

Without alerting the Brazilian population that the country is experiencing a new wave of the pandemic, the Lula government's Ministry of Health posted on Instagram on September 7 a series of recommendations to "prevent" COVID-19. "The first and most effective [action] against severe forms of the disease and hospitalizations is the vaccine," according to the Health Ministry's post, followed by "physical distancing in suspected cases," "hand hygiene" and "cleaning and disinfecting environments."

In the comments section, users of the social network responded angrily to the publication of the government that promised to follow science in its supposed "reconstruction" of Brazil after the years of destruction by the Bolsonaro government.

One of them reads: "How come you don't mention MASKS???? It was the masks that saved us before the vaccine and now they're not even mentioned? Surreal and absurd." Another comment drew attention to the fact that the Lula government is ignoring the scientific knowledge on the transmission of COVID-19: "Hand hygiene ... Cleaning the environment, physical distancing?! What is that? COVID is transmitted by aerosols and the only way to prevent it is with effective masks and an air-filtered environment! It's a lot of misinformation, they're playing games with us!!!"

Although the Lula government is following the strategy of the world's ruling elites of limiting its response to COVID-19 to vaccinations, even this has been inadequate and plagued by problems. At the end of last year, it ruled out universal vaccination against COVID-19, which is being offered to children between the ages of six months and five years, the elderly and other specific groups. However, there are increasing reports in the Brazilian media about the lack of COVID-19 vaccines in health centers.

In Minas Gerais, the second most populous state in Brazil, the daily *O Tempo* reported on September 7 that in 52 percent of 211 cities in the state there is no vaccine against the XBB subvariant of Omicron, which is the most up-to-date vaccine against COVID-19 that the Lula government bought. In São Paulo, the city of 12 million inhabitants that is the capital of the state of the same name, a report on the *g1* website on September 6, titled "Parents report lack of COVID-19 vaccine for children in health centers in the capital," showed that of the "164 health centers in the southern part of the city, 79 have no COVID-19 vaccine."

At the beginning of May, the Lula government launched a new phase of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19, with the distribution of around 10 million doses of Moderna's monovalent vaccine against Omicron's XBB.1.5 subvariant. So far, only 2 million doses have been administered. Further

exposing the Lula government's negligence, it announced at the launch of the campaign that its aim was to "vaccinate at least 70 million people" this year, according to the Ministry of Health's website.

In this context, the Lula government's use of Independence Day, on September 7, to supposedly celebrate the resumption of vaccination campaigns, particularly for children, is totally hypocritical. In a report in *Folha de S. Paulo* in the beginning of July, the director of the Brazilian Society of Immunizations (SBIIm), Isabella Ballalai, said that, contrary to what the Ministry of Health claims, "It's not just a question of misinformation, fake news, etc. The biggest factor [in vaccine hesitancy] is lack of information. We also know how important access to doses is."

In the *Intercept Brasil* interview mentioned above, Monica de Bolle reinforced Ballalai's observation, denouncing the "duplicity" and "ambiguity" of members of the Lula government, including its health minister, Nísia Trindade, who denounced the Bolsonaro government's criminal response to the pandemic, but "are now acting as if the virus is less important." For her, this "contributes to vaccine hesitancy continuing to rise."

As a faithful representative of Brazil's corporate and financial rulers, the Lula government is overseeing the destruction of the public health system and other social rights won by the working class. As shown by the government's neglect of the pandemic and its recent freezing of almost 10 percent of the health budget to ensure Lula's "new fiscal framework" and "zero deficit target" for this year, any illusions that it might be pressured to change its right-wing trajectory have been completely exploded.

The growing strikes that have broken out in Brazil, particularly in various sectors of federal workers against the Lula government, must raise the banner of a scientific response to end the COVID-19 pandemic. For this, it is necessary for the Brazilian working class to unite with its class brothers and sisters around the world in a common struggle for international socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact