Brazilian workers call for international solidarity from the global epicentre of the pandemic

The extent of the health, social and political crises underway in Brazil are directly caused by the federal government's lack of real interest in combating or coordinating a response to the pandemic, a denialism of science repeatedly demonstrated by the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro and his ministerial entourage, and the belligerent stance Bolsonaro has adopted towards multilateral and scientific consensus in dealing with Covid-19.

All of this has transformed Brazil into the global epicentre of the pandemic and a threat to its own people. The unparalled acceleration of infections and deaths has allowed for the growth of stronger novel strains of Covid-19 which also infect and kill young people. This makes Brazil a global health threat.

For these reasons, Public Services International (PSI), a global union representing unions from 154 countries and 30 million workers, reiterate the call for the international community and its multilateral representative bodies to increase pressure on the Brazilian government to adopt measures that protect lives. Measures that have been recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other representative bodies from various areas of scientific and medical research.

In addition to the explicit declarations of the president against the use of protective masks and social distancing policies, the disdain of the current president for fighting the pandemic is even more explicit in his speech against vaccination, which has resulted in almost total inaction in relation to the manufacture, acquisition and distribution of vaccines. Vaccination is currently taking place in an extremely slow and uncoordinated way. The government and the Ministry of Health turned down opportunities to pre-order vaccines, despite the warnings offered by the scientific and medical community and by the Brazilian union and social movements.

The lack of vaccines in Brazil has even deeper and older roots. A 2016 constitutional freezing of public spending for 20 years for all investments in health and education meant that the capacity of local public laboratories to research, develop and produce vaccines has been dismantled, leaving Brazil highly dependent on foreign manufacturers.
Given this situation and the limitations intentionally created by the systematic dismantling of public services underway in our country, entities such as PSI are engaged in campaigns to find alternatives for the acquisition and distribution of vaccines.

We are currently fighting in the National Congress to approve a law that would immediately break vaccine patents, a measure that would benefit not only Brazil, but many other developing and poor countries. The big laboratories and multinational pharmaceutical companies have placed profit above everything and everyone, including the lives of the population, causing rich countries to appropriate most of the vaccines to the detriment of others. The Brazilian government is one of the few developing countries that has positioned itself against public and collective interests and with transnational companies in rejecting the breaking of vaccine patents, and thus defending profit and private interests to the detriment of the lives of the population.

If patents were broken, public institutions such as the Butantan Institute and the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, for example, could produce vaccines for everyone immediately and on a large scale. We strongly defend the breaking of patents at the international organizations including the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organization of American States (OAS).

We are faced with a clear lack of vaccines, tests, beds, respirators, personal protective equipment and specialised teams to care for those already infected and those in intensive care. Courageous health workers are working hard to respond to the crisis, but, despite their efforts, there is a serious lack of materials. The consequences of this lack of materials for workers was denounced by PSI and its affiliated trade unions last year when we published a national survey as part of our organization's global campaign "Safe Workers Save Lives".

Our survey reported that 69% of health workers had not received training to deal with Covid-19 and that 63% did not have enough personal protective equipment in their workplaces. Confronted with a lack of qualified professionals, governments at all levels have resorted to outsourcing and temporary, precarious hiring without proper training in terrible working conditions.

Thus, in addition to millions of infections and hundreds of thousands of deaths, there is also an entire sector of exhausted and sick workers that are being devalued by governments, managers and employers. To make the situation worse, the federal government openly cuts funds for the preservation of existing hospital beds in all regions of the country. The public and private hospital system is collapsing and does not have the capacity to receive more patients.

Workers in other essential services are also suffering from precariousness and lack of basic protection. This is the case for cemetery workers, urban cleaners, and public transportation workers. In the education sector, teachers and other workers are being forced to return to classes without being vaccinated and without appropriate protocols. The result is that many education workers and students are infected with Covid-19.
PSI and its affiliates confirm that the pandemic cannot be halted without adequately protecting health and other essential service workers. It is critical that the responsible managers in every sector, the Ministry of Health, and employers immediately take all necessary measures for the support, protection and safety of the millions of professionals caring for the broader population.

According to a survey completed by Amnesty International with the help of global unions, 17 thousand health workers have died of Covid-19 around the world. A great number of these workers are from Brazil where they are highly exposed. Data confirms that health professionals are 5 times more likely to be contaminated than the general population. We are approaching the tragic number of 300 thousand deaths from COVID-19 in Brazil.

Meanwhile, the escalation of authoritarianism and repression continues without limit. There are many cases of persecution and punishment of union leaders and workers who have denounced poor working conditions or corruption.

Contrary to what most countries have done, the federal government has made it extremely difficult to implement financial aid programmes and other policies for the victims of the pandemic and the economic crisis. Previously vulnerable populations that were already suffering (women, afro-Brazilians and members of the LGBT+ community) have experienced a worsening of their living conditions, once again confirming how class, race and gender interact to structure social inequalities. 7 million women have lost their jobs during the pandemic according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). 105,000 cases of domestic violence were officially registered by the helpline known as "Dial 180". There is a frightening growth of misogyny in general and alarming setbacks in sexual and reproductive rights that directly impact health policies, programmes and the lives of women.

A portion of the most vulnerable members of the Brazilian population received temporary emergency aid of R$600 (equivalent to US$108) only after pressure from opposition parties in parliament. Even so, the government excluded many people that needed this aid, reduced the amount initially proposed by opposition members in congress and completely stopped these payments in January and February. Transfers were resumed in March, with an amount that was less than half of the original, while the government argued that there was a threat of a budget deficit. They linked the approval of this emergency assistance to wage cuts for public sector workers. And there is no political will to transition to a more inclusive and fair tax system even though the current system is extremely unfair and deepens inequality.

In addition to being intentionally underfunded, public services are under constant threat of privatization. This has serious consequences in terms of erosion of the universality of services and in the introduction of user fees. Congress passed a new regulatory framework for water and sanitation in June 2020 that opened the way for extensive privatization. More recently, President Jair Bolsonaro again promised the sale of Eletrobras, the state-owned company that generates 34% of Brazil's energy.
The Brazilian government has completely abandoned small and micro employers. In contrast to Germany, Italy, England, Spain and, more recently, the United States there are no organized policies to support continued production and maintain jobs.

In the international arena, the Brazilian government has transformed the country into a global health threat, since the neglect, slowness and lack of coordination facilitates the growth of new strains of the Covid-19 virus. From a diplomatic point of view, the constant contempt for multilateral institutions and their decisions - of which the disrespect for the Paris Climate Agreement is a well-known example - as well as attacks on individual leaders and governments of other countries, make Brazil an obstacle to consensus building and negotiations between nations.

Brazilian trade unions and social movements continue to fight, despite the limits imposed by the pandemic. We continue to denounce current problems and demand that decisions be guided by rationality and the need to preserve life.

On April 7th, World Health Day, we will reiterate our campaign for Vaccines for All!

And on April 28th, International Workers' Memorial Day for workers killed or injured at work, we will remember those who died fighting the pandemic and those who had no other option but to go to work and expose themselves to COVID-19 due to the absence of protective public policies.

Brazilians need your international solidarity and require immediate action from multilateral organizations to deal with this government. The international community must exert as much pressure as possible to protect the lives of Brazilians and all citizens of the world.

17 March 2021

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**CNTS** - Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Saúde  
**CNTSS** - Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Seguridade Social  
**CONDSEF** - Confederação dos Trabalhadores no Serviço Público Federal  
**CSPB** - Confederação dos Servidores Públicos do Brasil  
**FNU** - Federação Nacional dos Urbanitários  
**FETAM/SP** - Federação dos Trabalhadores da Administração e do Serviço Público Municipal do Estado de São Paulo  
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FETRAM/MA - Federação dos Trabalhadores Municipais do Maranhão
FETAM/MG - Federação dos Trabalhadores no Serviço Público Municipal do Estado de Minas Gerais
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SEEPE - Sindicato dos Enfermeiros no Estado de Pernambuco
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SINDNAÇÕES - Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Embaixadas, Consulados, Organismos Internacionais e Empregados que laboram para Estado Estrangeiro ou para Membros do Corpo Diplomático Estrangeiro no Brasil
SINAFRESP - Sindicato dos Agentes Fiscais de Rendas do Estado de São Paulo
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