

Epidemic

Mexican PRT statement on swine flu epidemic

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The health emergency brought about by the flu epidemic has important political and social repercussions, in addition to consequences for public health, that need to be explained in the midst of the confusion and distrust that the contradictory governmental versions generate. It is also necessary to open the way to scientific information, truth and political criticism.

A predictable epidemic

On April 24, 2009, barely 8 days ago, the Health Secretary, Jose Angel Cordova Villalobos, and the spurious Felipe Calderón, declared a health emergency because an epidemic of swine flu had already taken many lives and had extended to several states of the Mexican Republic. This declaration, if it is necessary to say so, came late and the series of measures that they have taken, even though they go in the right direction, are limited and are accompanied by threats to democratic liberties (like the possibility of levelling of homes in which case of flu are suspected) and are oriented in the sense of an authoritarian and arrogant vision at the political level as well as of that of the health system. The latter has, like the government faced with disaster situations, shown its inability to provide an answer to critical situations demanding broad and effective responses (earthquakes of 1985 and floods and hurricanes that have struck the national territory: Cancún, Tabasco, Chiapas, and Sinaloa).

The present epidemic of swine flu was preceded by manifold warnings from experts and inhabitants of the areas where big meat production complexes involving pigs and birds are located, particularly La Gloria, in the state of Veracruz. The government, nonetheless, turned a deaf ear, responding harshly and repressing those who dared to raise their voices in denunciation, demanding only the realisation of health checks and the application of standards of production and epidemiological monitoring on poultry and pig raising farms. But in addition, at the beginning of the epidemic, the government diminished its importance, saying that there was nothing to worry about. A day before the declaration of the health emergency it declared that only cases of stable flu would be treated and hid information that entered into contradiction with the data published by the World Health Organization, declaring a world-wide health alert, at level 3 of a pandemic.

Once again, the population has been deceived and distrusts the government and its measures, but

this is not gratuitous. Parallel to this, a broad network of actions and interchange has been developed around experiences that show, as happened in the earthquakes of 1985 in Mexico City of Mexico, the high degree of solidarity and commitment that this nation and its inhabitants, particularly those at the bottom, are capable of obtaining and developing. A new world breaks through, shared in common, humanist, respectful of differences and extremely creative, that confronts the world of corrupt tycoons and governors. Between those affected, in their districts, units, in the towns and in their social organizations, workers, housewives, students, health professionals who see themselves face to face with the pain and the need of patients, relatives and friends, support, comment, devise answers and explanations, and are identified. From these actions, from this experience, arises the consciousness of the necessity for change, the construction of a new health system, a different order, another Mexico, possible and already necessary, a Mexico that gives priority to the needs of the majorities, that prioritizes life over profits, that takes care of its culture, its methods of organization and favours collective initiative in the face of adversity and of a world where they confront those on top, the big employers and their government, on a day to day basis.

The PRT is committed to this perspective, with the preventive actions of containment of the epidemic and attachment to the unrestricted respect of human rights and democratic liberties, that constructs a new health system, that responds effectively and opportunely to this challenge, and it calls for punishment of the people in charge of this delayed response that has taken lives that could be saved, and led to suffering that could be avoided. The Health Secretary should be dismissed from their position and there should be a profound investigation of the causes and measures of prevention and control that will need to be set up to prevent this, like other health and “natural” disasters, taking human lives and causing suffering to thousands of people, as has been the norm, mainly, in the last three decades, those of the imposition of the neoliberal model in Mexico and the world.

Antecedents

On April 4, 2009, “La Jornada” published an article on the struggle of the community La Gloria with the photo of a boy in a demonstration holding a placard with a drawing of a pig and the legend: “Danger, Carrolls Farms” [1]. This demonstration was preceded by an investigation by the local health authorities that found that at the end of 2008 more than 60 percent of the population had been affected by an atypical respiratory infection of unknown origin. From March, in fact, cases of atypical respiratory infection had appeared in Perote and then in Jalapa, to which the systems of alert did not pay the necessary attention. According to Maria Montoya, of the Animal Health Research Centre in Barcelona, the time taken in identifying the type of influenza could be determinant in the number of deaths and the evolution of the epidemic (María Sainz, “Por qué sólo están muriendo personas por gripe porcina en México”, El Mundo, April 28, 2009). It was not until the first days of April that the first cases of swine flu were recognized. Initially they were badly diagnosed, because at the outset they were recognized as respiratory infections of virus type A: H2N3. But the conserved blood of a boy aged 4 was again analyzed and the diagnosis corrected. The infectious serotype had in fact been of type A: H1N1, that responsible for the present epidemic. Even before these findings, information had been hidden on outbreaks of bird flu on poultry raising production farms owned by the company Bachoco Farms [2] although this was hidden from the people.

It is known now that the swine flu virus has human, pig and bird genomics, which implies that there was genetic transfer of the virus between different species. This is more than feasible in the conditions of production of the big meat companies on pig and poultry farms, which are located in the area of Perote, in Veracruz, but this warning has been made already in many places around the

world. Whether this virus is of local or imported origin, at the very least, the fact is that in these farms the conditions of reproduction of viruses and of genetic transfer exist giving the opportunity for the outbreak of epidemics of this type. Despite the two calls for attention which occurred in the area, with the denunciation by locals of the presence of an anomalous respiratory infection near Carrol Farms and after the outbreak of bird flu in the poultry farms, the epidemiologist health alert system did not react until the dissemination of disease and the presence of serious cases of atypical pneumonia, with several dead, in other areas, particularly Mexico City, which because of its population density allows wide and fast diffusion, given the lack of prompt measures of prevention.

A delayed reaction from the authorities

The first declarations by the Health Secretary, in the sense that they dealt with seasonal flu and stated that the development of the cases was not a cause for worry, slowed down the response to what was already a health emergency. In any case, the statistics presented in Mexico differed from those later presented by the World Health Organization once cases in other countries appeared, particularly in Canada and the United States, but also in the Spanish State, Great Britain and New Zealand, followed by other countries. The presence of these cases beyond the borders of Mexico motivated the declaration of a level 3 and then level 4 pandemic (an international epidemic in that in addition to cases of imported origin there is local contagion particularly in the United States and the Spanish state). Once the numbers exploded, and before the pressure of international and national public opinion, the Mexican government and the Health Secretary had to declare a health alert and a series of measures to control the dissemination of the disease. All this shows the pre-eminence of profits over human health. The big transnational and national companies producing pigs, poultry and eggs, can skip standards and regulations, risking the health and lives of the people. The denunciations and needs of those affected who demand health monitoring and prompt diagnosis of the evils that affect them are worth nothing. The health system, whether in relation to monitoring or at the veterinary and human levels, turns a blind eye to allow the respective companies to continue business. For that reason we can say that the present health crisis is an expression also of capitalist irrationality and the signal of a crisis of civilizations, showing the results of the industrialized production of pigs and poultry for food.

The lack of confidence of the people

On the other hand, the antecedents of manipulation of information and fraud (it is enough to remember the "election" of Calderón or the "slight cold" of the economic crisis), not to speak of the fiascos in prevention and control of transmissible diseases in our country (rabies, dengue, tuberculosis and malaria), mean that the people distrust and reject the official versions and give independent responses, because in addition there have been contradictions in the declarations and concealment of numbers. Thus, despite the fear campaign and the inclusion among the preventive measures of actions harming human rights and democratic liberties (like the possibility of levelling of homes in the case of suspicion of disease, proceeding from diagnosis and isolation), the response of the people has been exemplary, especially in Mexico City. The doubts among the population on the area have to do with an explicable, justifiable and correct distrust towards the governmental accounts, especially the experience with this spurious government. The legitimate distrust towards the government has led some to think that we were facing an invention intended for purposes of manipulation, although this is a real epidemic, but one that is being dealt with in an authoritarian manner, seeking to strengthen police and repressive measures, manipulating the information to demobilize and to foment a vision of individualistic solutions and confinement in family houses.

Once the epidemic was recognised and the health emergency declared, measures of prevention and control were accepted by the people, promoting information and the taking of relevant actions between the communities and the social organizations. Commitment and solidarity has marked the behaviour of Mexico City in particular, developing a dynamics that aims at another form of organizing everyday life and human interaction, but this also happens in localities of lesser size. In any case, given the health resources the Federal District has, and the firm response of the capital's government, the control measures have reduced dissemination, not without some misfortunes and faults in attention and even discrimination in sectors of unprotected workers, with outsourcing of cleaning, security or maintenance meaning that working class populations with little resources and without social benefits have had to face the worse care conditions in cases of disease. Finally access to health services and the quality of the latter is itself differentiated according to the social layer of the sick person.

At the same time, the campaign of fear has also produced an "antichilanga" reactions (against the inhabitants of Mexico City) in some areas of the country (a pair of automobiles with DF plates were stoned in the state of Guerrero, for example), comparable to the discriminatory measures against Mexicans in foreign countries. This is a mistaken reaction, with deep reactionary and racist roots, which must be put aside because this is a phenomenon becoming a pandemic, not attributable to a city, a country or a race in particular, but to the capitalist irrationality that puts profits before the health of the population and the responsibility and inefficiency of a government, without legitimacy and opposed to the interests of the majority of the people through its surrender to the interests of a minority of national and foreign capitalists, who face the crisis with more authoritarian, repressive and police measures.

After an initial time at which the Health Secretariat issued official notices giving numbers of confirmed and suspected cases it is now only giving the numbers of confirmed cases, reducing therefore the impression of the impact of the epidemic and, in fact, hiding information again. Despite this, the proportion of deaths among patients (death rate) has been differentiated, both in relation to different entities in our country, and to a greater extent at the international level. In Mexico, the lowest death rate is in the Federal District, whereas the highest is found in San Luis Potosí, at least until we have more information; on the other hand, in the United States and Europe this same rate is much smaller than in Mexico. Since this epidemic is caused by a new virus, one can hardly think that this difference reflects differences in susceptibility of the inhabitants of the different countries or regions of Mexico, rather that this difference relates to deficiencies in the quality of attention, or accessibility (or lack of human, diagnostic or therapeutic resources once the illness has been treated). The neoliberal model and its implications for health

Although in an outbreak like this one, in which the infectious agent is new in its immunogenic profile, it would be necessary to produce a new vaccine, the Mexican government has taken steps to impede its own, national response to the emergency, dismantling the federally owned vaccine producing plant. In the 1950s and 1960s, Mexico had laboratories that produced the greater part of the vaccines that were consumed. The institute of Hygiene and Virology had this productive capacity, but under the government of Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo this capacity was dismantled, with the laboratories merged to create a parastatal institution which produces only two of the 12 vaccines of the basic vaccination scheme. [3].

The antecedents, as well as the volume and quality of research in virology, immunology, genomic and molecular biology shows that the scientific and technological capacity exists in Mexico to produce the required vaccines; but the government has preferred to import them and to benefit transnational laboratories, in a frank policy of technological and scientific submission with obvious health implications. Countries like Brazil and Cuba, on the contrary, have invested to maintain self-sufficiency in this field, showing that this "third world" dependency reflects choices of economic

policy and priorities marked by attachment to a model: the neoliberal one. Now the production of a vaccine has been made necessary, even though this takes several months and cannot prevent the present outbreak. It will be, however, of extreme utility for prevention in Mexico and other countries of future outbreaks and extension to other states, to avoid the repetition of an epidemic. In addition, it will be necessary to redouble efforts and to meet verification standards and health monitoring regulations in the production of meat (not only pigs and poultry, by the way), as this phenomenon tends to become general throughout agrobusiness, that subordinates society to the priorities of the market, for example in the production of sugar cane and maize for ethanol production to generate electrical energy, and the introduction of transgenics in a field affected by the import of maize and other agricultural products within the framework of the Free Trade Agreement.

We also experience in this land the consequences of years of neoliberal policies that have reduced investment in scientific research as part of a commodified educational model and the diverse processes of privatization of the health and safety services.

But everything is not negative. Many workers' organizations have showed their support for measures of control and prevention of the epidemic, while making criticisms of the reprehensible aspects of the actions of the government and the Health Secretary. The measures of partial unemployment of economic activity have caused shared common reactions of diverse type between people, in relation to childcare for example. Without doubt those measures taken will have a negative impact on an already battered economy, but the effect will be differentiated for the different social classes. While some have seen drastic repercussions on their everyday life, others have even been beneficiaries (like the supermarkets, benefiting from "panic buying", or the companies producing medicine, supplies and other products used in health care and prevention - face masks, for example, or disinfectants).

Special attention should be paid, on the other hand, to the restrictive provisions on democratic liberties, like that relating to the inviolability of the home, or of the right to demonstrate and hold meetings, that have been put at issue under the pretext of the health emergency, taking therefore one step more in the authoritarian and restrictive measures on elementary rights, that the military and police state tries to justify, previously by the fight against drug trafficking and organized delinquency, now by measures for prevention of an epidemic. As revolutionaries we declare our total opposition to the violation of rights and limitation of liberties, simultaneously we pronounced our total solidarity with the measures of prevention and control of the epidemic, with total respect for the dignity and freedom of people, without discrimination of any type, because first of all we assume the commitment to take care of our children, young people and pregnant women, who in this epidemic are most vulnerable.

In this as in all action in politics and in health practices, as revolutionaries we fight to prolong life, a full life with dignity, freedom, justice and equality, pursuing happiness and constructing in harmony with nature a world in which all worlds fit, and we assume the commitment to support and to foment the relevant measures to mitigate the effects of this epidemic, which is already international.

In the midst of the health emergency and surely immediately after, new social fights will develop. It will be necessary to impel them and to foment corresponding, broad and unitary organization. We will also have to redouble efforts in defence of human rights, that to the balance of previous impunity and injustice, marked by the great amount of prisoners, persecuted and political disappeared, it is necessary to now add opposition to legislative and governmental measures that are currently being approved to restrict democratic and political rights.

But also in the social area and in defence of the popular economy, because the attack against the rights and living standards of working people that are already living with the economic recession,

unemployment, dismissals, a greater loss of the purchasing power of the wages of workers and their families threatens to break out again with the health crisis, at a time when exemplary struggles continue needing greater support, like the strike, already of 21 months length, of the miners at Cananea.

The advocates of globalisation face a capital challenge now, as they face at the same time the fiasco of their economic model and the appearance, more and more frequently, of emergent phenomena or natural disasters (tsunamis, floods like that of New Orleans, earthquakes, emergent diseases) which challenge the viability of the capitalist system and its capacity to offer security, food, work and the possibility of a worthy life, sometimes the continuation of life itself.

In conclusion, it is every day more evident that it is not able to even satisfy the most elementary necessities of most of the population and a new world is necessary, a model that takes care in the first place of the necessities of most of the population. Another world is born from this crisis, a shared in common world based on attachment to life and its enchantments, that shows that another way, another world, another Mexico, by all means, is possible, but also urgent and necessary. A world based on respect and solidarity between men and women, as well as between peoples.

México DF, April 30, 2009.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV # 412 - May 2009.

* The PRT (Revolutionary Workers Party) is a Mexican party that supports the Fourth International

Footnotes

[1] Andrés Timoteo, "Alerta epidemiológica en Perote por brote de males respiratorios", *La Jornada*, April 4, 2009

[2] Piden cerco sanitario ante epidemia, SPI/ElGolfo.Info, April 24, 2009:

<http://www.elgolfo.info/web/lo-mas-...>

[3] Thelma Gómez, "México desoyó a la OMS". "El Universal", April 30, 2009