

The Epicenter of COVID-19 in South America

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...as of April 9, 7,646 deaths attributable to Covid-19 had occurred in Guayaquil. The so-called prosperous and successful city Guayaquil is host to 80% of the dead and infected.

Guayaquil and Quito are the two most important cities in Ecuador economically and politically. Guayaquil, the epicenter of COVID-19 in South America, is a river port located at the mouth of the Guayas River on the Pacific Ocean. The city has around 2,700,000 inhabitants. As a port, Guayaquil has always been Ecuador's main point of connection with the world, hence its permanent economic importance for international trade. About 80% of the country's private exports and imports use its facilities. With its diverse commercial and productive center, Guayaquil is considered the economic capital of the country.

Setting the stage for a pandemic

In the early 19th century, the nascent commercial bourgeoisie in Guayaquil were key to gaining independence from the Spanish empire. Later, in the first years of the 20th century, the bourgeoisie, together with the middle class and popular sectors, supported the triumph of the "Liberal Revolution" led by Eloy Alfaro. After a few years, the same bourgeoisie, to protect their economic interests, abandoned the most radical and popular postulates of the revolution, culminating in the assassination of Alfaro.

Right-wing politicians in Ecuador have come up with explanations that generally blame the tragic effects of the pandemic on a lack of discipline within the population and especially among the poor. Other sectors attribute the collapse to the incompetence and lack of preparedness of the national government. A good part of the country points to the Social Christian mayors for forging a fiction of success and prosperity that hid the truth about the real living conditions of the vast majority of the population.

In reality, the best possible explanation of the situation in Guayaquil has to do with all of the above. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC), Guayaquil is the city with the highest poverty rate in all of Ecuador, with 14.1% in 2018. By December 2019, 51% of Guayaquil residents were engaged in informal employ-

The dialectic of reality is bringing the possibility of at least some justice into the way forward.

ment and 16.2% were deemed underemployed.

Factors contributing to COVID-19

In their effort to satisfy the interests of the neoliberal policies of the IMF and the ambitions of Ecuadorian business sectors, the national government has been acting in collusion with the Social Christians and other right-wing parties. Since the new national government came to power in 2017, it has dismantled the public sector, including the public-health budget. According to the Annual Investment Plan, from \$306 million in 2017, investment in the public-health budget fell to \$201

million in 2018, and to \$110 million in 2019. In other words, prior to the pandemic, spending on public health was reduced by almost 70% in 3 years.

Simultaneously, the vast majority of the population does not have the minimum conditions to fulfill a quarantine and stay at home. Guayaquil has an average temperature of 86 degrees Fahrenheit. The houses

are precarious, without adequate sanitary services, without books or internet, without air conditioning, or in many cases, without electric fans. How can the 6 to 8 people who live in a dwelling stay inside a one or two-room house? They are generally tenants who live on the economic opportunity that day to day presents to them. How can they afford not to leave the house if they do not have even a dollar to buy the minimum daily food?

A false impression of prosperity

The images are sad and vivid: corpses left in the streets, women and men demanding that the authorities remove the dead from their homes, people forced to deposit the dead in the garbage. These images show the incompetence of the current Social Christian Mayor of Guayaquil, Cynthia Viteri and the Vice President of the Republic Otto Sonnenholzner.

At the same time, they show how this unforeseen event, the Coronavirus pandemic, is bringing to light a reality consciously and closely guarded by the Guayaquil national and international bourgeoisie. It turns out that Guayaquil is simply

e importaciones privadas del país utilizan sus instalaciones; es un centro comercial y productivo diverso considerado simbólicamente como la capital económica del país.

Preparando el escenario para una pandemia

En ese contexto, esta urbe ha sido y es punto político de primer nivel en el Ecuador. A comienzos del siglo XIX, la naciente burguesía comercial fue clave para la independencia del imperio Español. Posteriormente, en los primeros años del siglo XX, esta burguesía, junto con sectores medios y populares fueron determinantes para el triunfo de la Revolución Liberal encabezada por Eloy Alfaro. Sin embargo, luego de pocos años, esa misma burguesía, se encargó de hacer prevalecer sus intereses y echar abajo los postulados más radicales y populares de esa revolución culminando con el asesinato de Lenin Moreno.

The case of Ecuador and the city of Guayaquil illustrate how the formerly euphemistically called "banana republics" still organize, relentlessly, in favor of the elites whose interests align with elites around the globe, embracing the measures of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) while glossing over the needs of the majority of the people. The COVID-19 pandemic is both exacerbating and illuminating the harsh realities of many Ecuadorians' lives. Perhaps it will become a moment to push back, once again, on interests of the global elites.

What the pandemic reveals

The image of prosperity promoted by Guayaquil's oligarchy, led by the Social Christian Party, has basically served to cement the power of

a typical capitalist city in a small and peripheral country, steeped in inequality.

The false symbolism of prosperity has served only the few who are able to benefit from the impoverishment of the majority whose per capita income of \$85 per month, who live crowded into small spaces, and who suffer from the severe deficiencies in basic health services. Data about homicides and robberies in the city show they are almost always the highest in the country.