

Black Death To Repeat in Brazil ?

A freak cold snap has badly damaged Brazil's agriculture and sent the tottering Brazilian economy over the brink of catastrophe. The unusual cold weather has dealt a body-blow to the country's already crippled ecology and further exacerbated the population's death-camp living conditions.

It was in a similar manner that a "bad-crop" during the ecological crisis in mid-14th century Europe set off the Black Death, the tidal wave of bubonic plague that killed half the continent's population.

Unless the military dictatorship moves rapidly to dump Brazil's gigantic \$14 billion debt and imports large quantities of food, Brazil faces in the next months either total ecological holocaust or the explosion of long-suppressed but simmering working-class rage. While the junta temporizes, bourgeois factions terrified by the prospect of working-class uprisings are demanding the institution of debt moratoria in the affected regions.

The bizarre cold snap hit large areas of Southern Brazil on July 17, sending temperatures plummeting in the major agricultural regions from the 80 degrees F typical of winter in this tropical region to the low 20s. The frost continued for a week thereafter. Such frosts occur every few years, but not so severely for decades.

The most immediately threatening damage was to the large cattle herds and pasture lands of the provinces of Minas Gerais, Parang MatoGrosso, and Rio Grande do Sul. With hundreds of thousands of cattle already dead from the frosts, nearly the whole herd of more than 20 million is threatened with starvation because the frost destroyed the grass on which they depend. The pasture lands are not expected to recover for at least four months. Milk production in the biggest dairy state, Minas Gerais, has fallen by 50 per cent so far.

Such widespread and lasting damage from a short frost is due solely to the depletion of the Brazilian ecology. Ten years of slash-and-burn clearing of jungle for cattle breeding has left a legacy of laterized, barren soil and near-starved cattle, vulnerable to the slightest shock.

Similar damage was suffered by the main winter food crops. Forty per cent of the total annual wheat crop, 50 per cent of the banana crop (a major staple in Brazil), and 35 per cent of the sugar crop were lost, in addition to large quantities of vegetables, fruits, and potatoes. Major damage to coffee trees, where the crop is already harvested, has also severely threatened next year's coffee crop.

The immediate impact of this destruction on the Brazilian food supply is devastating. The present working-class diet averages no more than about 1500 calories daily. Unless the food lost to the frost is replaced by imports, there will be a further 10 to 15 per cent drop at least in this starvation diet and a nearly 30 per cent drop in the already abysmally low levels of protein consumption.

Speculation on food shortages has already sent food prices up an average of 30 per cent in a week and in some cases 60 to 100 per cent in the major cities of Rio and Sao Paolo. Such price rises will throw the proletarian population into mass starvation.

Combined with this, the destruction of the crops has sent hundreds of thousands of now-unemployed agricultural workers and peasants streaming into the bloated favelas (slums) of the cities.

This mammoth drop in the standard of living comes on top of an already near-catastrophic ecological situation. Recent floods in the northeast of Brazil have put Recife, the country's third largest city, 80 per cent under water. In

major regions already affected by rat-borne bubonic plague, rats are packed together with humans in the few remaining dry areas. Meanwhile the collapse of Brazil's export-oriented steel and other industries has sent unemployment rates above 30 per cent.

Given the already astronomical levels of infectious diseases, the combined impact of the crowding together of thousands of displaced peasants and urban slum dwellers and the disastrous food price rises, if allowed to continue, will produce a general collapse of the population's resistance to disease and mass death.

What, however, frightens the Brazilian bourgeoisie far more than the threat of plagues is the possibility that the shock of the food price rises and the huge rise in unemployment will touch off an explosion in the working class. With the recycling process which had kept Brazilian workers in line broken down, with neighboring Argentina setting a local example for a revolt, and with the press filled with reports of the revolution in Portugal, a country to which Brazil has close cultural ties, the controls on Brazil's working class are bursting apart. The Junta has responded with a massive roundup of Brazilian Communist Party members.

The bourgeois press, already moving towards dumping the government's policy of paying debts at all costs, is now giving publicity to the demands of the big agricultural interests for a debt moratorium.

The Junta, meanwhile, has played down the impact of the frost and Minister of Commerce Severo Gomes has refused the moratorium demands. But large layers of the Brazilian bourgeoisie are all too aware that the military regime's seeming stability may be as fragile as that of the Russian Czar in 1917.