

Media sensationalism, corporate power and the swine flu outbreak

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The handling of the swine flu outbreak underscores the difficulty, in the present political environment, of separating medical science from corporate interests and the political agendas of governments that are beholden to them. The matter has been both sensationalized and mystified, to the detriment of any rational response to the health threat posed by swine flu.

The mass media and public authorities, particularly in the United States, have now subjected the population to constant, breathless coverage of the swine flu epidemic for over a week. But for all the hours of television reportage and reams of press commentary, little light has been shed on the nature of the virus or the underlying conditions of poverty and decay of the social infrastructure that play a huge role in the potential human toll of such a flu outbreak, should it, in fact, develop into a global pandemic.

On April 30, the media reported that the World Health Organization (WHO) was expected to soon designate the swine flu as a full pandemic, at level six on the WHO's six-point scale. WHO director-general Margaret Chan declared, "It is really all of humanity that is under threat during a pandemic."

Shortly afterwards, however, the WHO said that it would continue to use the term "pandemic" even if "the new virus turns out to cause mainly mild symptoms."

Currently, however, the swine flu outbreak shows little sign of imminently threatening all of humanity. The WHO's official count yesterday listed 787 confirmed human cases of swine flu, of which 506 are in Mexico, where the disease first appeared.

The Mexican government scaled back its tally of swine flu deaths from 176 to 100, of which 19 are "confirmed." The only swine flu death outside of Mexico so far was a Mexican toddler, who died after being brought to the US from Mexico.

References to pandemics, made without any serious explanation of the scientific meaning of the term, have created an atmosphere of public fear. Since 9/11, the American media and government, in particular, have

adopted fear-mongering as a standard tactic for stoking up fear and politically disorienting the public, and then exploiting such moods to justify a militaristic foreign policy and attacks on democratic rights.

Media reports have explained the significance of a pandemic by citing the Black Death plague that wiped out a third of the population of 14th-century Europe, or the 1918 flu epidemic that killed 30-50 million people worldwide. In fact, the swine flu has until now caused far fewer deaths than even normal, seasonal flu.

The risk of a larger swine flu epidemic cannot be dismissed, though its spread is currently slowing and those newly infected are experiencing milder symptoms. Its transmission from pigs to humans, and between humans, causes concern among scientists that it might have the genetic structure, possibly after a further mutation, to trigger a larger epidemic. Passing through more human hosts could cause new mutations. These might make the virus more or less dangerous to humans.

Biologists point out that the 1918 epidemic began with a milder first wave, which by the onset of the normal flu season in the autumn assumed a far more virulent and deadly form.

Media invocations of the 1918 epidemic are confusing, however, absent the necessary historical context. Many essential tools of a contemporary response to a flu epidemic—anti-viral drugs, DNA analysis, Internet monitoring networks—were unknown in 1918, when modern sanitation was largely unavailable even to the popular masses in wealthy countries. Subsequent flu outbreaks caused far fewer deaths: 2 million in 1957 and 1-3 million worldwide in 1968, versus 250,000-500,000 in an average flu season.

Influenza can be dealt with by deploying medical resources and personnel in a timely fashion to isolate and treat an initial outbreak, before it becomes a global pandemic.

The greatest obstacles to this are not technical ones, but rather the social contradictions of world capitalism: poverty

and lack of medical facilities in large parts of the world, the political influence of major corporations, including the giant pharmaceutical firms, the division of the world into competing nation-states, and the reactionary agendas of bourgeois politicians.

The physical state of the working class itself is a major issue. Many millions of workers lack access to a healthful diet, sanitary shelter and adequate sleep—all of which are needed to maintain a healthy immune system. Such issues, however, are almost never broached in the media commentaries and pronouncements of governments.

The current epidemic began in late March in a small Mexican town, La Gloria, that is the site of Granjas Carroll, an industrial pig farm largely owned by a US corporation, Smithfield Foods. Even after the flu epidemic began, Mexican officials threatened and arrested inhabitants who protested that the farm's open lakes of pig excrement and toxic chemicals were damaging their health.

Many of those who fell ill were too poor to afford treatment by medical professionals—which the Mexican government acknowledged were in short supply in that area—arriving at the hospital when severe pneumonia had set in, making anti-viral treatments no longer effective.

In NBC's "Meet the Press" news program yesterday, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and the acting director of the US Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Richard Besser, were asked why the mortality rate was so much higher in Mexico than in the US. None of the officials mentioned poverty or lack of access to medical care as factors in the Mexican swine flu deaths.

In another sign of the destructive role of corporate power, the pork industry has successfully lobbied the WHO and the US government to cease referring to the disease as "swine flu." The manner in which these authorities respond—almost at command—to the demands of corporate interests is indicative of the subordination of all social considerations to private profit.

The response to swine flu in the US highlights a decay in social conditions that would pose significant dangers in the event of a serious epidemic. Government officials advise Americans to consult their doctor if they come down with flu symptoms, ignoring the fact that they preside over a country—"the richest in the world"—in which 47 million people, nearly one sixth of the population, have no health coverage.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that several US cities have reported that their hospital emergency rooms have been flooded with people who feared that they had caught swine flu and who went to the emergency room because they lacked access to a private doctor.

Some local authorities have responded with panic measures that can only needlessly increase public apprehension and place additional economic strains on a population already reeling from the impact of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. The entire school system in Fort Worth shut down, keeping 80,000 students at home, even as Texas Governor Rick Perry criticized "a substantial amount of media hype" around the swine flu.

US officials have lectured families to begin making arrangements for dealing with sustained school closures—this in a country that provides no paid leave for family health emergencies.

The US government's response to the swine flu reflects the immense growth in the political influence of the military-national security apparatus, and further bolsters that influence. Public opinion is conditioned to view any emergency, including an outbreak of flu, as a "national security" threat, by implication linked in some manner to the "war on terrorism."

Thus Napolitano, a lawyer with no particular health experience, is brought forward as the Obama administration's main spokesperson on the crisis. The Obama administration is reportedly adopting Bush administration pandemic plans, which called for the use of the military to enforce quarantines against entire sections of the US.

US politicians and the media have repeatedly made reactionary proposals to close the US-Mexico border, even though health officials have repeatedly stated that such measures would do nothing to halt the spread of the disease. Such proposals are calculated to stoke up anti-Mexican prejudice and xenophobia.

This only underscores the immense contradiction between humanity's technical abilities to deal with a health crisis and the social priorities and class interests that hold sway under capitalism.

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