US meningitis outbreak: A deadly product of deregulation

Statement by Jerry White, SEP candidate for US president

Jerry White
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The deadly meningitis outbreak in the US continues to spread. The latest report from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that 214 people have been stricken so far with a rare form of fungal meningitis, and 15 people have died as a result. Many more may be threatened, and the death toll will likely climb in the coming days. On Monday, the said that more drugs may have been tainted than originally reported.

The deadly outbreak is not an unexplainable tragedy. Rather, it can be traced directly to the profit motives of the corporate entity implicated and the lack of government oversight of drug manufacturing. This lack of oversight is linked to moves by both big-business parties to pare back and do away with government regulations that hinder corporate profits. In this case, people are paying for this deregulation with their lives.

According to the CDC, an estimated 14,000 people are at risk of contracting meningitis after being treated with injections of a steroid contaminated with a fungus normally found in leaf mold. Tainted vials of the medication were shipped from the New England Compounding Center (NECC) in suburban Boston to 76 health care facilities across the country. Meningitis, an inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord, is often fatal.

NECC is one of an estimated 7,500 specialty pharmacies operating across the US that supposedly produce customized drugs to treat the specific needs of individual patients.

These drug compounders are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), but are overseen by state health authorities.

While such “compounding pharmacies” originally began as small operations, they have burgeoned in recent decades into a $3 billion business. Many of these companies do not obtain individual prescriptions, as state laws require, but rather ship out their products in bulk to health care providers. Despite being cited by the FDA and Massachusetts authorities for violating safety standards, NECC was able to continue its operations and ultimately ship out the tainted steroids in question.

Compounding pharmacies have been implicated in dozens of deaths over the last decade through the production and distribution of contaminated or mismeasured doses of medications. Scores more people have been badly injured or disabled. Yet a 2003 measure that would have set up an FDA advisory committee to oversee compounders was defeated by a $1 million lobbying campaign of a compounding industry trade group.

But while horrific in its scope, the current meningitis outbreak is hardly an anomaly. In recent years, the American population has been subjected to numerous outbreaks of illnesses linked to contaminated food, which have sickened thousands and resulted in multiple fatalities. A partial list for just the past few years includes: cantaloupe infected with Salmonella, spinach dip adulterated with Listeria, E. coli in strawberries, Salmonella-infected ground turkey, Listeria-tainted bagged salad, peanut butter infected with Salmonella—the list goes on.

On a daily basis, working families’ health, living conditions and very lives are put at risk by the rapacious drive for profit, compounded by lack of government oversight due to budget cuts and deregulation. Those responsible—whether government officials, businesses, or corporate executives—are never

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held criminally accountable or compelled to provide meaningful compensation to their victims.

One disaster after the next is inflicted on the American people by corporations run amuck. In the wake of the financial meltdown four years ago, millions lost their homes to foreclosure and were financially devastated. While the banks were bailed out to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars, they are now amassing record profits, even as they gut their workforces. Homeowners were never made whole.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina claimed at least 1,836 lives, and displaced more than 1 million people. The storm exposed the city of New Orleans and the region's woefully inadequate and underfunded levee system. The suffering of Katrina's victims was met with indifference from federal emergency officials and the Bush administration. To this day the levees throughout the area have not been adequately rebuilt.

Less than five years later, the BP oil spill devastated the same region, claiming the lives of 11 workers in the initial explosion. No BP officials were ever held criminally responsible for their disregard for safety and the destruction caused to the health and livelihood of residents, or the damage done to the environment.

The current meningitis outbreak has been a non-issue in the presidential contest between Barack Obama and his Republican opponent. Mitt Romney and his running mate Paul Ryan, who espouse a program of unbridled enrichment for the financial elite, openly oppose any restrictions on big business, even when their operations threaten the health and lives of the American people.

But while denounced by the Republicans for supposedly hampering corporate America with regulation and red tape, the Obama administration's record on deregulation is in fact nothing of the kind. In fact, the administration has boasted of its efforts to eliminate "unnecessary" regulations, going so far as to present such handouts to corporations as part of its "jobs program."

The Obama administration's Department of Agriculture has supported a proposal to allow chicken slaughterhouses to inspect themselves, a move that would allow chicken producers to ramp up production and could save the poultry industry more than $500 million over three years. The Office of Management and Budget estimates that the cost of new government regulations across all industries in the first three years of the Obama administration was lower than in the previous three years, under the administration of George W. Bush.

It is highly unlikely that the meningitis outbreak will be a topic at tonight's presidential debate, unless it happens to be raised by a member of the well-vetted "town hall" audience. To both candidates, the people sickened and killed by the tainted steroids from NECC are unfortunate casualties—the cost of doing business.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the policies of both big business parties, which call for the continued subordination of society to the profit drive of big business—even when such policies pose a potential health risk to tens of thousands of people.

In response to the meningitis outbreak, we call for a full investigation into the operations of the compounding pharmacy, criminal prosecution of the suspect parties—including government authorities—and monetary restitution for those sickened and killed. The pharmaceutical industry must be placed under the social ownership and democratic control of the working class, as part of a socialist overhaul of the health care system. Only the socialist reorganization of society can provide for the health and well-being of America's workers and their families.

For more information on the SEP campaign and to become involved, visit socialequality.com. Attend the SEP regional conferences by registering here.

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