

Ebola in America

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Every new development in the Ebola outbreak in the United States further exposes the incompetent, indifferent and irresponsible character of the official US response to what the World Health Organization has called “unquestionably the most severe acute public health emergency in modern times.”

On Wednesday, US officials announced that a second nurse at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital involved in treating deceased Ebola patient Thomas Eric Duncan had tested positive for the disease. She had been allowed to fly on a commercial aircraft twice, from Dallas to Cleveland and back, after having been exposed to the disease. She subsequently reported having a fever during her return flight.

On Tuesday, National Nurses United, the largest nurses' union in the US, revealed that nurses at the hospital had been instructed by administrators to provide care for Duncan, a native of Liberia, with part of their faces and necks exposed. They were told to compensate for their inadequate protective equipment by wrapping medical tape around their exposed skin.

Despite nurses' protests, Duncan was left for hours in a common waiting area with other patients, potentially infecting them. His lab specimens traveled unprotected throughout the hospital's tube system, potentially contaminating the entire system. Nurses forced to treat Duncan with inadequate protective garments were then told to carry out their normal hospital duties, visiting and potentially infecting other patients.

These outrageous violations of basic Ebola contamination protocols took place *after* Duncan had been taken to the hospital a second time in an ambulance because family members suspected that he had contracted the disease.

On Wednesday, President Obama responded to mounting public concern and criticism by staging a photo-op with cabinet officials, including Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and National Security Adviser

Susan Rice. He issued a brief and perfunctory statement and took no questions from the press in what was clearly an exercise in damage control.

Nothing said by Obama or any other government official can be believed. Their overriding concern is to cover up their responsibility for the disaster, not to level with the people and do what is necessary to protect them.

The first known victims of the negligence of hospital and government officials are medical workers, whose lives have been recklessly endangered. The indifference to the safety and health of these workers sums up the attitude of the ruling class to the well-being of the population as a whole.

This is not the first time that an emergency has exposed the fact that matters relating to the health and social conditions of the general public are of absolutely no concern to those who wield economic and political power in America.

Nine years ago, the virtual destruction of a major American city by Hurricane Katrina exposed the lack of any preventive measures to combat the impact of a major flood in a region repeatedly inundated in the past, or protect the lives of New Orleans' working class residents. The disaster itself starkly revealed shocking conditions of poverty, and the belated, desultory and hopelessly inadequate government response led to nearly 2,000 deaths.

Just five years later, the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico resulting from the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig once again exposed the criminal negligence of the corporations and the complicity of the government. This was an entirely man-made disaster, the result of cost-cutting and unsafe methods on the part of BP that was facilitated by the government regulatory agencies. The cleanup effort was handed over to the company that was responsible for the disaster in the first place.

In between and since there have been countless plant explosions, fires, coal mine disasters and industrial accidents in cities throughout the United States.

The American ruling class and its political frontmen such as Obama view issues affecting the safety and well-being of the American people as annoyances. They detract from the business of generating ever greater profits for the corporations and ever greater fortunes for the rich and the super-rich.

Like every other aspect of the social infrastructure of America, the health care system has been degraded as a result of decades of budget cuts and profit-gouging by pharmaceutical and insurance companies and hospital chains.

While it had been known for decades that an Ebola outbreak could happen in the United States, no effort was made to adequately prepare for one. No vaccine has been brought into production. Instead, the resources needed to address pressing health issues have been diverted to pay for war and conquest abroad and the ever-greater enrichment of the American financial aristocracy.

Earlier this week, World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan explained the failure to develop an Ebola vaccine, saying, “a profit-driven industry does not invest in products for markets that cannot pay.”

Dr. Francis Collins, the head of the US National Institutes of Health, told the *Huffington Post* that a vaccine for Ebola would likely already exist if not for multi-billion dollar cutbacks in health care research.

These disasters expose the bankruptcy and failure not just of one administration, but of the capitalist profit system itself. The subordination of all social concerns, including health care, to the corporate drive for profit and the money-mad greed of the ruling elite, together with the irrational division of the world into rival nation states, makes the rational and socially beneficial development and utilization of the productive forces impossible. Instead, obscene levels of wealth in the hands of a few is accompanied by the decay of basic social services and mounting poverty for the masses.

A serious campaign to halt the widening Ebola epidemic in Africa and its spread to the US and other countries requires:

- * The establishment of an international team of doctors, scientists and health care professionals to take

the response to the crisis out of the hands of corporate-dominated governments. This team, developing a global plan of action, must be provided with whatever resources are needed—however many billions of dollars—to treat all those already infected and prevent the spread of the disease.

- * A state-funded research program completely independent of the profit interests of the health care industry, the drug companies and the insurance giants must be established to rapidly develop and make available to all an anti-Ebola vaccine as the first step in conquering this and other infectious diseases that are linked to poverty.

This is not merely a scientific task. It is a political question.

It is necessary to draw the appropriate conclusions from the Ebola outbreak and the string of catastrophes that preceded it. The implementation of a rational and humane response to the Ebola crisis, along with all the other social evils that are intrinsic to a society based on exploitation, requires a struggle by the working class to reorganize society on socialist foundations to meet social needs, not private profit. This includes taking the profit out of medicine and providing high-quality health care to all as a social right.



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