

Zika, social inequality and capitalism

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15 April 2016

The US Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC) Wednesday announced that it had determined sufficient evidence exists to establish that the Zika virus, which has spread like wildfire throughout the Americas, causes microcephaly, a devastating birth defect that leaves infants with smaller than normal heads as a result of the brain failing to develop properly.

The findings, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, came on the heels of a warning from US health officials that the danger posed to the United States by the virus was far greater than had originally been anticipated.

“Everything we look at with this virus seems to be a bit scarier than we initially thought,” said the CDC’s deputy director, Dr. Anne Schuchat. She explained that *Aedes aegypti*, the mosquito species that carries the virus as well as other illnesses, such as dengue fever, chikungunya and West Nile virus, was present in 30 US states, rather than 12 as originally believed.

In the US semi-colonial territory of Puerto Rico, she added, the number of Zika infections may rise into the hundreds of thousands, with hundreds of affected babies.

Within the continental US itself, there have been 700 people reportedly infected with the virus as of last week, including 69 pregnant women.

Zika is a global threat to public health. This week Brazil, the epicenter of the Zika outbreak, said it had confirmed 1,113 cases of microcephaly, with most of them thought to be caused by mothers contracting the virus during pregnancy. Crises of a similar scale face many countries in Latin America. The World Health Organization has predicted 3-4 million new infections throughout the hemisphere.

The virus has also been linked to severe neurological disorders in adults.

In the face of this crisis, the US Congress has rejected

a request for slightly less than \$2 billion to confront the Zika crisis. With no new funding, the Obama administration has siphoned \$589 million from funds previously allocated to combat the 2014 Ebola outbreak that has ravaged West Africa, claiming over 11,000 lives.

The same Congress had no difficulty in approving hundreds of billions in military spending. The \$2 billion proposed for Zika is equivalent to the amount spent to purchase a single Virginia Class nuclear submarine or two stealth bombers. However, there is supposedly no more money that can be allocated to protect mothers, infants and others from the tragic consequences of the Zika virus.

This criminal indifference of the US Congress to the spread of the Zika virus stands as an indictment not merely of its Republican leadership, but of an entire social system that subordinates the vital needs of humanity to profits and the accumulation of wealth by a tiny oligarchy.

There is a profound class basis for the failure of the US government’s response to this public health crisis. The Zika virus is overwhelmingly an illness rooted in poverty and social inequality.

The epicenter of the Zika outbreak was the Northeast of Brazil, the poorest region of a country, in which 35 million people have no running water and over 100 million lack access to sewage systems. Millions more live in impoverished *favelas*, slum neighborhoods, in which regular garbage collection does not exist. All of these factors are ideal for breeding the mosquito that spreads the virus as well as other deadly diseases. Conditions have only worsened as Brazil’s economy has descended into the worst crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Complacent predictions that the spread of the virus will not present a similar threat to the population of the United States deliberately ignore the fact that large

sections of the US population also live in impoverished conditions, without adequate housing, social services or healthcare.

This is clearly true in Puerto Rico, where half the population lives below the poverty line. It is also the case in large sections of the south, where the danger is greatest, including in cities such as Miami, Orlando, New Orleans and Houston.

“This could be a catastrophe to rival Hurricane Katrina or other recent miseries that disproportionately affect the poor,” Peter Hotez, chief of the Baylor College of Medicine National School of Tropical Medicine, wrote in a column published in the *New York Times* last week.

The comparison is apt. What was revealed by Katrina was not just the incompetence and indifference of the government in the face of a widely predicted catastrophe, but also the terrible consequences of decades of deterioration and neglect of social infrastructure and the evisceration of social programs benefiting the broad masses of people in order to further enrich a ruling financial and corporate oligarchy.

The same attacks have been carried out against the public health care system through decades of budget cuts. This process has culminated in Obamacare, part of a calculated strategy to reorganize health care along class lines, while facilitating the profiteering of the big pharmaceutical and insurance corporations and hospital chains.

Revealingly, among the few initiatives announced by the Obama administration and Congress thus far in relation to Zika is an incentive program for the drug companies, offering them expedited regulatory review in order to get their most lucrative new drugs onto the market in return for studying “unprofitable” infectious diseases like Zika. While public health officials have called for a sharing of all information in regards to such developments, the big pharma companies in the US have given no indication that they will comply.

Just as the Ebola outbreak has been followed by Zika, many more devastating epidemics are inevitable, and, given global travel, they will spread around the world. They can be effectively combatted only through an internationally coordinated effort backed by the resources needed not only to rapidly develop and make universally available vaccines against these modern-

day plagues, but to eradicate the conditions of poverty and oppression that allow them to spread.

Standing in the way of such a necessary effort is a failed capitalist system, which subordinates all social concerns, including health care, to corporate profit and the bitter rivalries between the capitalists of different nation-states.

The claim that resources are not available is a lie. The mountains of wealth hoarded by the 20 richest Americans who have more than the bottom 50 percent of the US population would pay for such vitally necessary changes many times over.

Confronting crises like the outbreaks of Ebola and Zika is fundamentally a political question. It requires a struggle by the working class internationally to reorganize society on socialist foundations to meet social needs, not private profit.



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