

US death rate rose in 2015

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The death rate in the United States increased across the board last year for the first time since 2005 according to preliminary figures released this week by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The report provides yet another piece of information documenting the deep social distress which is fueling the growth of social opposition in the working class.

Earlier this year the CDC reported that life expectancy at birth for white Americans had fallen between 2013 and 2014 from 78.9 years to 78.8 years, after remaining flat between 2012 and 2013.

Not all Americans are being affected equally, with income and social class overwhelmingly determining the quality of an individual's health and the length of their life. A report published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in April found that income was the most critical factor in longevity and that the life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest is widening.

Growing mortality rates for working people are not the outcome of accidental or unavoidable processes, but rather a social counterrevolution which has been consciously directed at dramatically lowering the living standards of the working class. The impact of the implementation of multi-tier wage structures, the elimination of employer-paid health care, the eradication of defined-benefit pensions and the slashing of retiree pension benefits is finding expression in these statistics.

Policymakers have been quite open about their desire to drive down the life expectancy of the working class and poor. Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, one of the leading architects of the Obama administration's health care overhaul, has called for the rationing of health care based on income and has discouraged people from getting potentially life-saving medical screenings. On Tuesday, the day before the CDC's figures were released, Emanuel called for raising the cost of

prescription antibiotics, nominally in the name of halting over-prescription. "Low prices reduce the barrier to prescribing antibiotics, while high patient demand fosters overprescribing," Emanuel declared.

In reality, Emanuel and his co-thinkers would be more than pleased if the rise in the death rate continued in the coming years and decades. While its full impact has yet to be felt, one of the unstated goals of President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act is to reduce workers' access to health care, reducing the life expectancy for all those who cannot afford to pay in order to pad the profits of health insurers and corporations.

Decades of deindustrialization and austerity, accompanied by a dramatic rise in economic inequality and associated social ills, are finding expression in the broadest of social indicators: mortality and life expectancy.

In its latest estimates, adjusted to account for an aging population, the CDC found that the death rate was 729.5 per 100,000 in 2015, up from 723.2 in 2014. The leading causes of death following heart disease were cancers, lung disease, accidents (including automobile crashes, falls, shootings and drug overdoses) and stroke.

The national mortality rate has declined significantly and almost continuously since 1940, when the rate was 1,785 per 100,000. Above all the growth in life expectancy was the outcome of fierce struggles waged by the working class in the first half of the 20th century for better wages; shorter working hours; company-paid pensions, to provide for them in old age; and health care, which gave them access to revolutionary new medicines and treatments. Workers also fought for the implementation of safety standards and regulations which dramatically decreased the number of people killed or sickened on the job.

Yearly increases in the overall mortality rate have

been relatively rare: last year was only one of seven instances in the last 36 years in which the national rate ticked upwards.

According to the CDC, the rate was driven upwards last year by an increasing rate of death from Alzheimer's, drug overdoses and suicides. At the same time, the rate of death from heart disease, the leading cause of mortality in the US, on the decline for decades, edged up slightly.

The suicide rate in the US increased from 12.7 in the third quarter of 2014 to 13.1 in the same quarter of 2015. The rate has increased more than 24 percent since 1999, with much of the increase coming since 2006. The biggest surge in the suicide rate has occurred among young girls between the ages of 10 and 14 and men between 45 and 64.

The rate of deaths from drug overdoses also increased substantially, from 14.1 in the second quarter of 2014 to 15.2 last year. A majority of drug overdose deaths were unintentional, and opioids, including prescription pain medication and heroin, accounted for an increasing share of these deaths. The number of opioid overdoses and deaths has exploded in the last few years, an ongoing epidemic impacting cities and counties in every part of the country.

The long-term reversal of the social gains made by the working class has only accelerated in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. President Obama has overseen one of the greatest transfers of wealth from the working class to the rich in world history.

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Obama's much-hailed economic recovery has seen 95 percent of all income gains go to the top 1 percent and all job growth over the last decade has come from people working as independent contractors, temps through contract agencies or on-call. Median household income has declined as workers have seen their wages and benefits stagnate or decline.

These are the objective social conditions which are driving the anger and discontent that has found an initial expression in the 2016 presidential primaries.

The fascistic and xenophobic Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has found support posing as an opponent of the political establishment and tapped into social anger over the decline of living standards, promising to "Make America Great Again."

Under conditions where the leading Democratic presidential candidate, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, is the favored candidate of Wall Street and the corporations that have immiserated the working class, millions of workers and young people have cast their ballot for Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders.

While the ultimate purpose of Sanders' campaign is to direct workers and young people back into the Democratic Party, he has garnered substantial support because he promotes himself as a socialist and a staunch opponent of the "billionaire class" and the status quo which has contributed to the dramatic decline in living standards.

Growing opposition to the political establishment has been accompanied by the eruption of social struggles, including the recent strike by 39,000 communication workers at Verizon; mass protests against the poisoning of residents in Flint, Michigan; and opposition to the destruction of public education in Detroit, Michigan, the historic center of the US auto industry.



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