

# The coronavirus pandemic: A global disaster

**Bryan Dyne**  
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The number of confirmed cases of the 2019-nCoV coronavirus outbreak that began in the Chinese city of Wuhan has now surged past 43,000. The number of fatalities is now at least 1,013 and at least 25 countries have at least one person suffering the disease. Dozens more countries are either monitoring patients with fevers and pneumonia-like symptoms or preparing for potential infections.

The outbreak has now exceeded both the number of infections and fatalities of the 2002-2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic and is continuing to spread, despite the quarantine measures imposed by Chinese and world governments.

Cities across China, especially in Wuhan, the epicenter of the novel coronavirus, remain under partial or total lockdown in an effort by the government to contain the spread of the virus. Millions of people have remained home and turned many of China's major urban centers, including its most populated city Shanghai, into veritable "ghost towns." Those who do venture outside are often relatives of the infected, who are seeking aid from overtaxed hospitals or searching for food and other necessities to care for those that have already been turned away from medical facilities.

The coronavirus contagion has become a disaster and a tragedy for the tens of thousands infected and the tens of millions who remain under quarantine, shocking people all over the world.

Yesterday, Beijing and Shanghai announced new controls on the movement of residents and vehicles, including tracking and quarantining anyone who was in Wuhan or another highly infected area in the past 14 days. Both cities have joined at least 80 others across 20 provinces that have imposed either partial or total lockdowns, affecting at least 103 million people.

At the same time, work across China resumed yesterday after an extended Lunar New Year holiday. As the population begins to travel once again, they are doing so under extraordinary scrutiny. The government has set up infrared cameras to measure body temperature at public transportation stations, offices, factories and industrial parks. Residents have been advised that they shouldn't leave their homes if they don't have a surgical mask. Multiple cities,

including Wuhan and Beijing, have set up special quarantine zones where people suspected of being infected are being forcibly remanded. Threats have been issued that people breaching quarantine could face the death penalty.

There are now concerns that essential supplies are running out in Wuhan and elsewhere in Hubei province. To date, the Chinese government has sent 17,000 medical personnel and more than 3,000 tons of supplies to the province, which has somewhat lessened the pressure facing doctors and nurses, though hospital beds are still in short supply. However, places such as Singapore, where there are 45 confirmed cases, are considering only hospitalizing the worst cases. "If we still hospitalise and isolate every case, our hospitals will be overwhelmed," admitted Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Song on Saturday.

Lee's remarks came alongside reports that the virus is likely more widespread than officially known. Neil Ferguson, an infectious diseases expert at London's Imperial College, wrote Sunday that "only 10 percent or less of all infections in China and a quarter in other countries were being detected." A paper published by Chinese respiratory expert Zhong Nanshan on Monday theorized that the incubation of the novel coronavirus could be up to 24 days, not the 14 days currently accepted. This position was given further weight when a patient in China's Henan province was diagnosed as an infected patient after displaying no symptoms for 17 days.

There has been an outpouring of solidarity from the world's population since the imposition of quarantine measures in China. Thousands of Go Fund Me and similar pages have been set up to direct money and supplies to the beleaguered areas. Doctors and medical professionals have begun multiple efforts to find a cure to 2019-nCoV while working to care for and heal those currently infected. At the same time, the tens of millions that have been caught in the quarantine zones have done everything they can to limit the spread of infection, including isolating themselves as much as possible, even when their employers have demanded they return to work.

The sympathy from the workers and youth internationally towards China is all the more significant under conditions of

growing national antagonisms. In a particularly vicious comment, hedge fund manager Kyle Bass tweeted Sunday, “We should take our supplies and go back home. Let the Chinese virus rampage through the ranks of the GT [state-owned newspaper *Global Times*] and the rest of the Communist Party.”

Bass’ comment came little more than a week after US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross gloated that the coronavirus outbreak would undermine China as an economic competitor and give US-based companies “yet another thing to consider when they go through their review of their supply chain... So, I think it will help to accelerate the return of jobs to North America.” The Commerce Department itself stated: “It is also important to consider the ramifications of doing business with a country that has a long history of covering up real risks to its people and the rest of the world.”

The United States government’s response to the coronavirus has been to ban foreign nationals who were recently in China from entering the country, while enforcing quarantine on its own citizens for the first time since the 1960s. It has also demanded \$1,000 airfare to repatriate its citizens to the US and is reportedly charging both for any treatment they require and for their mandatory housing on military bases.

The responses internationally have been along the same draconian lines. Across Asia, businesses have put up signs declaring that Chinese citizens are unwelcome, forcing Chinese people living abroad to describe themselves as Korean or generically “Asian” in order to get essential services. Australian citizens in China attempting to evacuate have been sent to Christmas Island, a remote facility in the Indian Ocean built to imprison so-called “illegal” refugees. Britain yesterday declared the coronavirus an “imminent threat,” allowing the government to detain and quarantine anyone suspected of being infected.

In Brazil, which has eight suspected cases and zero confirmed cases of the coronavirus, the right-wing government has already announced a public health emergency. It has isolated 34 individuals on an airforce base who were repatriated from China, where they will remain for the next 15 days. One of the few things they will be allowed to do is watch the base’s military band play live.

Pharmaceutical companies are already looking to profit from the attempts to find a cure, with some stocks rising by as much as 110 percent after announcing their own teams to develop a vaccine. They are in a scramble not to protect human beings, but to get a larger portion of the \$8.54 trillion global health care market.

The contrasting responses between ordinary people and the ruling elites internationally pose the question of what sort of

social system is needed not just to stem, but to prevent and eliminate, the danger of global pandemics. Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent every year by the United States and China on their defense budgets, while they grudgingly hand out ever-decreasing amounts to medical and scientific institutions that could put a stop to the coronavirus and other outbreaks if they were properly funded.

As workers and youth around the world over have realized, the response to contagious diseases must extend across national borders. As with every other social problem—including the ever-widening social inequality, accelerating climate change and the heightened threat of war—the coronavirus epidemic is a global problem that requires an international solution. Moreover, the fight against the spread of such diseases must not be held hostage to the corporations and the shareholders who only work to find a vaccine when they can profit off the dead and dying.

The response to the coronavirus epidemic has exposed the incompatibility of the capitalist nation-state system with the most fundamental human needs. Riven by national divisions and the scramble for geopolitical power, the capitalist nation-state system is incapable of any systematic or planned response to the threats facing humanity, from infectious disease to extreme weather and climate change.

It is therefore critical for those alarmed at the outbreak of the novel coronavirus to turn to the working class. It is the working class that has suffered the brunt of the epidemic. It is the working class that is objectively and increasingly defining itself as an *international* class. It is the working class whose social interests lie in socialism: the overthrow of capitalism, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, and the establishment of an economic system based on the satisfaction of human need, including the highest living standards and health care of every human being.

The science, technology and productive capacity exists to solve the great social problems of our time: pandemics, global warming, the destruction of jobs, social inequality, the assault on democratic rights and the threat of world war. At the same time, the rational and coordinated democratic planning of the world economy can ensure increased living standards and quality of life for the world’s population. The only social force that can achieve this goal is the international working class, through the method of world socialist revolution.



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