

The Trump administration's incompetent and criminally negligent response to the coronavirus outbreak

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The second and third confirmed “unknown origin” cases of coronavirus in the United States add to the growing body of evidence that US officials have made a disastrous series of mistakes in response to the mounting outbreak, putting an unknown number of lives at risk.

On Friday, a northwest Oregon resident and a 65-year-old resident of Santa Clara County, California tested positive for the disease. Both individuals had no known travel history to centers of the outbreak and no connection with anyone previously identified as infected. This follows the news Wednesday that a woman in Solano County, California, about 90 miles away, tested positive for the disease, also without any obvious sources of transmission.

Since the virus has a two-week period before symptoms occur, and because most cases do not require hospitalization, the disease is likely already present in a much broader population.

Even though the initial outbreak emerged in China two months ago, US officials have done next to nothing to prepare for its emergence within the United States.

Only a small handful of locations are prepared even to carry out testing for the disease. Without proper testing procedures, no individual quarantine measures – the only effective way to contain its spread – can be implemented.

The reaction of the Trump administration has been focused entirely on attempting to bolster the stock markets while utilizing the spread of the disease to escalate its trade war policies and shut down travel to the United States from even more countries, building off of its xenophobic travel ban.

In January, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross declared that the outbreak of coronavirus in the world's second largest economy could be good for the American economy. “So I think it will help to accelerate the trend of

jobs to North America,” Ross said of the epidemic. “Some to US, probably some to Mexico as well.”

Yesterday, Trump again dismissed growing warnings from doctors and scientists that the outbreak could quickly become a pandemic affecting the lives of millions of people. “It's going to disappear, one day it's like a miracle, it will disappear,” Trump proclaimed. “And from our shores you know it could get worse before it gets better, could maybe go away, we'll see what happens, nobody really knows.”

Vice President Mike Pence, a religious obscurantist who rejects the reality of evolution, has been appointed to oversee the administration response to the outbreak. Pence's press secretary, Katie Miller, the wife of Trump's fascistic adviser Stephen Miller, will be in charge of all coronavirus communications.

Trump's acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney went as far Friday as to dismiss the threat of the coronavirus, blaming the media for playing it up. He declared, “[T]hey think this will bring down the president, that's what this is all about.” These remarks were delivered at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which was held under the theme of “America vs. Socialism.”

There have been plenty of warnings, increasingly dire, about the impact of the coronavirus, not just in China but in the United States and throughout the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) raised the alarm in 2018 that it was time to prepare to combat a possible “Disease X,” a viral infection that would emerge in animals and be transferred to humans. The WHO report warned that such a disease would spread rapidly and without initial detection, evading efforts at quarantine.

The US government has done nothing to prepare for predictable disease outbreaks, which in the age of

globalization and mass air travel can spread very rapidly from one part of the globe to the other.

Instead, the Trump administration has been slashing funding for initiatives that are aimed at preventing the spread of diseases like the coronavirus.

Budget cuts in 2018 caused the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to shut down 80 percent of an initiative aimed at preventing global disease outbreaks. In October, the US Agency for International Development was forced to shut down a program that deployed teams to detect and halt the spread of disease from animals to humans, including at markets where animals are improperly slaughtered. Trump's budget proposal for 2021 would slash CDC funding by 16 percent.

The White House has eliminated the positions for advisers on global health issues from the National Security Council (NSC). Trump fired Tom Bossert, his homeland security adviser on the NSC, in 2018. His responsibilities included overseeing the US government's response to pandemics, but he was never replaced.

Health workers have not been prepared to handle the outbreak. NBC News reported Friday that a government whistleblower has filed a complaint that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) dispatched a dozen employees without proper training or equipment to interact with Americans evacuated from Wuhan, China and placed in quarantine on military bases in California.

The whistleblower complaint notes that the HHS employees had face-to-face contact with the individuals heading into quarantine, handing out keys for room assignments and identification ribbons. While the workers have not shown symptoms of the virus, such major breaches in protocol could have resulted in transmission.

The whistle-blower is seeking federal protection after being summarily reassigned after raising her concerns to HHS officials. She was told that if she did not accept the new position in 15 days she would be terminated.

Two weeks after the CDC announced that it would launch a surveillance testing program in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle, the initiative had still not begun. Meanwhile, scientists at 40 labs across the US were given the go-ahead only Wednesday night to use a test for detecting the coronavirus. A problem had been discovered with one of the ingredients in the test, limiting almost all testing for the last two months to one CDC lab in Atlanta.

The disastrous state of preparedness for the spread of the disease in the United States is not the responsibility just of the Trump administration. For decades, the ruling

elite, under both Democrats and Republicans, has overseen the devastation of social infrastructure. Trillions have been expended to bail out the banks, finance the US war machine and erect a massive police state apparatus. A series of natural disasters, from hurricanes to wildfires, has exposed the fact that the government cannot protect the population from entirely predictable threats to public well-being.

For the past three years, the Democrats have focused their entire opposition to Trump on the claim that Russia represents a grave threat to "American democracy," as the ruling class fights out differences over foreign policy. Meanwhile, real threats to millions of workers and young people have been covered up, and opposition to the Trump administration based on the social interests of the vast majority of the population suppressed.

The Socialist Equality Party supports the call of the International Committee of the Fourth International for a globally-coordinated emergency response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The working class must mobilize now to demand a massive allocation of resources for health care and treatment, and to ensure that all those who are impacted by the economic fallout are compensated and receive financial support. The trillions of dollars that are held by the global super-rich must be confiscated to develop the necessary health care infrastructure around the world, without regard to national boundaries.

In our election campaign, Norissa Santa Cruz and I will fight to mobilize the working class to fight for these demands as part of a political offensive, in opposition to the Republicans and the Democrats, against inequality, war and the capitalist system.



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