US authorities in disarray and paralysis in face of Covid-19 emergency

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The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases around the globe has risen to 135,000, with sharp increases reported in major European countries and the United States. The death toll will soon pass 5,000. Health experts internationally are warning that unless urgent measures are taken, mass infections could take place and the virus could claim millions of lives. Italy has now reported over 15,000 infections and over 1,000 deaths—a shocking fatality rate of over 6 percent, nearly triple the rate registered in China where the viral outbreak began last December.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally classified the COVID-19 epidemic as a global pandemic. They explained, in the most succinct terms, that their rationale for the assessment stemmed from their frustration that national governments had demonstrated a lack of resolve to muster the necessary resources to prevent the spread of the virus. Their exasperation was present in their voices and demeanor as they attempted to convey to reporters the dire consequences of this inaction.

WHO officials stated, “without naming names,” that government officials were not taking basic steps to stem the viral outbreak, despite the contrasting experiences of China, South Korea, Iran and Italy demonstrating the necessity for widespread testing and quarantining.

The belated actions taken by the Chinese government on January 23 to effectively lock down the epicenter of infections in Hubei province halted community transmission of the virus over the following month. The number of new cases has now fallen to just a few per day, with overall infections in China peaking at just over 80,900, with 3,172 recorded deaths. The majority of new cases being reported are people who contracted COVID-19 outside China.

No measures comparable with the steps taken in China are being implemented in the United States, despite ample evidence exists that the virus is spreading rapidly and unchecked. Instead, attempts are being made to conceal the extent of the crisis. Reuters reported this week that the White House had ordered all federal health officials to “treat top-level coronavirus meetings as classified.” Such classified discussions have been taking place since mid-January, when the outbreak in China was recognized as an emerging global risk. Lower-level officials and staffers without security clearances have been prevented from attending these meetings or participating in conference calls.

The Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) has authority over all health agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). One of its primary responsibilities is to track the development of the COVID-19 epidemic and provide guidance nationally on the outbreak. These HHS meetings have been held in secure areas called Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facilities (SCIF), which are principally used by the intelligence and military community. Cell phones and personal computers are barred from these spaces.

According to Reuters, a former high-level official who worked in George W. Bush’s administration said: “It’s not normal to classify discussion about a response to a public health crisis.” Reportedly, the talks have centered on China and the scope of infections, quarantines and restrictions—not on how to respond to the spread of virus within the US.

Within the Trump administration, the health crisis ravaging China was initially welcomed as opportunity to ramp up trade war measures and boost the market share and profits of American-based corporations. In late January, when Hubei province was placed under an unprecedented lockdown, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross gloated on Fox Business that the outbreak would “accelerate the return of jobs to North America, some to the US, probably some to Mexico as well.”

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Every action the Trump administration has taken concerning the COVID-19 pandemic has been geared to the interests of the financial markets and corporations. The utter disregard for public safety has been blatant. President Donald Trump baldly declared that the risk from the virus was “very low and that workers could continue to work, even if they were sick.”

Despite the fact that the virus had been spreading for several weeks in Washington state and other parts of the US, no straight answer has been provided from government officials as to why mass national testing is still not being carried out. Health officials have been denied the ability to even accurately assess the extent of COVID-19 infections and, on the basis of such information, recommend the appropriate response.

Mike Ryan, the World Health Organization’s head of emergencies, warned: “Hope is not a strategy. We are still very much in the up cycle of this epidemic… There’s clearly an indication that a systematic government-led approach using all tactics and all elements available seems to be able to turn this disease around.”

Such advice has been disregarded. Asish Jha, the director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, commented this week: “Our response [in the US] is much, much worse than almost any other country that’s been affected.”

Dr. Jha has been evaluating hospital preparedness in Massachusetts, where the tally of cases has reached 108, with 13 more confirmed yesterday. He stated: “Some of the best epidemiologists in the world are estimating that between 40 and 70 percent of adults will end up getting an infection. Even if we begin with that low end of 40 percent of adults in Massachusetts, that’s 2 million people getting infected.” He provided a conservative estimate of 200,000 hospitalizations in Massachusetts alone, when there are only 4,000 hospital beds available at any time in the state.

Yesterday, Amy Acton, the director of the Ohio Health Department, explained that evidence of community spread indicated that one percent of Ohioans are most likely infected with COVID-19. The office of Ohio Governor Mike DeWine stated: “Whenever you know of two people that have it due to community spread, then you can assume that one percent of your population has it,” This would suggest that there are over 100,000 cases in the state. The basis for the statistical assessment was a 2017 Morbidity and Mortality Report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Mayor of New York City Bill de Blasio has declared a state of emergency as the number of infected persons in the city has more than doubled in 24 hours to 95. Health officials expect to see more than 1,000 cases by next week. In Chicago, the city’s massive Saint Patrick’s Day parades have been canceled out of fears of the disease spreading throughout the dense crowds. Governor Pritzker announced that all public gatherings with more than 250 people would be banned. An announcement of state-wide school closures in Illinois is expected soon.

Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota, an infectious disease expert who has been warning for more than a decade that the world would face a pandemic, stated this week: “We are worse off today than we were in 2017 because the health care system is stretched thinner now than ever. And public health funding has been cut under this administration.”

The United States health care system lacks the capacity to treat the number of cases that will be filling the emergency departments of one city after another. Workers are expected to continue to work, despite facing the threat of the virus and a situation where every friend or colleague may be carrying the disease, which will then be further transmitted to their families and deeper into their communities.

Just this week, a worker in Indiana at a Fiat Chrysler Automobile plant tested positive for COVID-19 and was placed in quarantine at home. However, the plant, located just 50 miles north of Indianapolis and employing over 4,000 workers, announced it would continue production after cleaning the worker’s station. No steps have been taken to test the entire workforce.

The criminal negligence of the Trump administration, which serves only the interests of the corporate oligarchy, has all but guaranteed that there will be mass COVID-19 infection across the United States, and a terrible death toll. The working class must take matters into its own hands.

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