

The response of the ruling elite to the coronavirus pandemic: Malign neglect

Alex Lantier, Andre Damon
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The global coronavirus pandemic entered a new phase yesterday, with 16,000 new cases recorded worldwide by the Johns Hopkins coronavirus tracker. Another 250 people died Friday in Italy, which announced 2,547 new cases. Spain's cases nearly doubled, growing by 2,086. In the United States, nearly 572 new cases were discovered, with nine new deaths.

On Friday, the *New York Times* published internal CDC estimates outlining various scenarios for the spread of the virus, concluding that “between 160 million and 214 million people in the United States could be infected over the course of the epidemic,” and that “as many as 200,000 to 1.7 million people could die.” The *Times* continued, “2.4 million to 21 million people in the United States could require hospitalization, potentially crushing the nation's medical system, which has only about 925,000 staffed hospital beds.”

In the face of this mounting disaster, a massive chasm exists between the severity of the situation and the response of world governments.

On the surface, this response appears to be chaotic, disorganized, and improvised. All of this is true. But out of this chaos a definite policy emerges, which can be defined as malign neglect. That is, governments are making a deliberate decision to minimize their response, to adopt an attitude of indifference to the spread of the virus.

In the late 1960s, as mass strikes, urban riots and anti-war protests spread across the United States, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the right-wing advisor of President Richard Nixon, proposed a policy of “benign neglect” of US cities—that is, a policy of ignoring the causes of massive social unrest in the hopes that this would encourage the depopulation of centers of working-class struggle.

In their entirely passive response to the coronavirus pandemic, which is controllable only through massive coordinated government intervention, governments have extended the policy of “benign neglect” into something far more sinister.

This week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said 60 to 70 percent of the German population would likely be infected—potentially meaning the deaths of hundreds of thousands or millions of people. On Thursday, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared, “I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.”

Neither the British nor the German government announced major additional allocation of funds to deal with the crisis. Rather, Johnson's chief scientific advisor, Sir Patrick Vallance, insisted that the British government should not try to keep the coronavirus from infecting the public: “It's not possible to stop everyone getting it, and it's also not desirable.”

There is no doubt that at least some members of the ruling class see coronavirus fatalities as desirable. British *Telegraph* columnist Jeremy Warner stated openly what is being discussed within ruling circles when he wrote, “the COVID-19 might even prove mildly beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents.”

But the most callous response has come from United States. On Friday, US President Donald Trump gave a press conference at the White House together with executives from some of the largest healthcare and retail companies in the United States.

Trump announced no additional measures to stop the spread of the disease or expand treatment for the ill. Rather, he announced that virtually the entire government response would be turned over to the private corporations.

Instead of testing by the Centers for Disease Control, effectively all coronavirus diagnostics would be conducted by private corporations such as Quest Diagnostics and Labcorp. Instead of treatment at hospital facilities or on public property, they will be conducted in the parking lots of major retailers, such as Walmart, Target, and CVS. Trump said the website to coordinate and requesting testing would be designed and operated by a for-profit company, Google. Google later clarified that no such website existed.

Trump made clear that the pandemic is a profit opportunity for the corporate executives standing with him, who were paraded around as if they were national heroes.

In fact, their mania for profit lies behind the systematic destruction and defunding of social services that has made possible this disaster. For decades, it is these oligarchs who have subordinated every social need to “shareholder value,” the phrase used to justify the ever-greater accumulation of wealth at the hands of the financial oligarchy.

Trump, flanked by multi-millionaire executives, appeared as the embodiment of the corporate state. The only role he sees for government, aside from pumping Wall Street full of money, is to use the national emergency to build up an apparatus of police repression.

For the ruling elites, the coronavirus pandemic was never viewed as a health care crisis, but rather as a market event. The preeminent concern has always been the impact of this disease on share prices.

The response has been, as it was in 2008 and 2009, a massive infusion of money and social resources into Wall Street. Trump’s press conference followed the announcement of a \$1.5 trillion bailout of the financial system by the Federal Reserve, a figure twice as large as the original size of the 2008 bank bailout and over a thousand times larger than the emergency coronavirus funding requested Friday by the World Health Organization.

Trump was sending a very clear message to Wall Street: It does not matter how many people die, what hell the population is forced to live through: My government will protect your wealth.

The financial oligarchy, with their private “concierge health care” and access to the best facilities—antiviral drugs, oxygenation, and emergency ventilators—know

that they will get the best care even as medical workers in overrun hospitals are forced to make heart-rending decisions about who will live and who will die.

Wall Street got the message. In the half-hour between when Trump started speaking and the close of the markets, the Dow Jones Industrial Average shot up by about 1,400 points, in the largest daily stock market run-up in history.

The main fear of the ruling class is not the devastating health consequences of the coronavirus, but the growth of social protests, to which they will respond with violence and repression. The eruption of strikes and walkouts by workers in Italy, protesting the fact that they are being forced to work amidst the pandemic, is only the beginning of the response of the working class.

The development of a movement in the working class throughout the world must be armed with a program and a perspective. In the face of neglect and indifference by the oligarchy, the working class must fight for a massive and globally-coordinated action to fight the disease.

Trillions of dollars must be allocated, not for boosting share values and the wealth of the financial oligarchy, but for ensuring universal testing for everyone who needs it, the construction of new health care infrastructure, the production of desperately needed health care equipment, and emergency assistance for all those who are unable to work because of unsafe conditions.

The monstrous and inhuman response to the pandemic by the ruling class is laying bare the real nature of the capitalist system, which provides for the vast enrichment of the few at the expense of the great many. Securing the most fundamental requirements of civilized society requires the overturning of this system and its replacement with socialism.



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