

National interests stand in the way of a coronavirus vaccine

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The global coronavirus pandemic exposes the inability of capitalism to solve the complex problems of a mass society. This is true not only in relation to containing the virus and protecting the population, but also in regard to developing a vaccine, which is crucial for overcoming the pandemic in the long term.

International cooperation among scientists and technological means for the development of vaccines have made enormous progress in recent decades. The genome of a virus can be decoded in a very short time, and instead of immunising people with a weakened form of the virus, it is now possible to construct vaccines using genetic engineering.

However, the control of drug production by a handful of pharmaceutical companies, which make huge profits and protect ground-breaking discoveries through patents, stands in the way of these achievements. The result is that the production of vital medicines is delayed or blocked entirely, and those that are developed are unaffordable for large sections of humanity. Moreover, medical advances are often used as weapons in the global competition for markets and profits, with the company controlling a drug denying it to its economic rivals.

The ruthless methods used in this fight have been demonstrated in recent days in the dispute surrounding the German biotechnology company CureVac, which is working on a vaccine against the coronavirus.

On Sunday, *Welt am Sonntag* reported that President Donald Trump offered CureVac huge sums of money to transfer its research to America and secure for the US the exclusive right to the COVID-19 vaccine it is developing.

The truth of the story is not clear. Dietmar Hopp, who owns 80 percent of CureVac, only seemed to confirm the story when he said that selling the company to the US was “not an option” for him. He added that it would not be possible for a German company to develop the vaccine and have it used exclusively in the US. Hopp, who co-founded the software company SAP in 1972, is one of the richest men in Germany, with assets of 10 billion euros. Today he is an investor in medical start-ups and a patron of the arts.

After the publication of the report, German government officials attacked the US vociferously and behaved no less nationally than Trump.

“Germany is not for sale,” foamed Federal Minister of Economics Peter Altmaier (Christian Democratic Union—CDU). The federal government “has a great interest in producing active substances and vaccines in Germany and Europe,” he added. Altmaier declared that the German government could prevent the takeover of German companies by other countries, “especially when national or European security interests are at stake.”

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party—SPD) said that German researchers were “at the forefront of the development of drugs and vaccines, in worldwide cooperation.” He continued, “We cannot allow others to exclusively appropriate their research results.”

Senior representatives of the US administration, on the other hand, described the report to the *New York Times* as “overblown.”

On Tuesday, CureVac denied the report in the *Welt am Sonntag*. The company stated on Twitter, “To make it clear once again: CureVac has not received an offer from the US government or related agencies before, during or since the White House Task Force meeting on March 2.” And in a conference call with international journalists, top management expressly denied having received a takeover offer or an offer for exclusive production from Trump or the White House.

What is certain is that the then-head of CureVac, Dan Menichella, a US citizen, met with the Coronavirus Task Force, led by Vice President Mike Pence, at the White House on March 2. The meeting was also attended by the heads of several other biotech companies and President Trump himself. Menichella announced that his company would soon bring a vaccine into the trial phase.

Eight days later, Menichella had to resign from the company he had led for two years. He was replaced by Ingmar Hoerr, who had originally founded CureVac. One week after that, Hoerr also resigned, “for health reasons,” it was said. He was replaced by his deputy, Franz-Werner Haas.

The tug-of-war over CureVac, involving the highest government circles, shows the intense effort the pharmaceutical industry is putting into the fight for profits and market share. No crisis is too severe that it cannot be used to make money.

Enormous profits are to be made with a vaccine against

COVID-19. But its development is expensive and protracted. The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) estimates that the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines will require some two billion dollars over the next twelve to eighteen months.

According to a report by the British *Observer*, some 35 companies and academic institutions worldwide are currently engaged in a race to develop such a vaccine. Since Chinese scientists made the gene sequence of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 freely available at the beginning of January, research work was able to begin at a very early stage.

In order to shoulder the enormous costs of research, testing, approval and production, the companies are dependent on public funds and rich donors, such as Hopp and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which also holds a stake in CureVac, who can afford to invest large sums in risky projects. Since only a few competitors make it to clinical approval, the large investments are a total loss for most of the competing firms. But those who make it over the finishing line can expect a huge windfall.

Capitalist governments have a great interest in keeping such companies in their own country. They are seeking to strengthen their position in the global pharmaceutical market, which amounted to \$1.2 trillion in 2018. Far more than half of this was accounted for by five countries: the US (\$485 billion), China (\$134 billion), Japan (\$85 billion), Germany (\$52 billion) and France (\$36 billion).

Hopp was celebrated as a hero by the German media after he assured them that he would not sell CureVac to the US. Under the headline “The brazen attack on CureVac is a wake-up call for Germany,” *Die Welt* wrote that the “all too clumsy attempt to lure valuable technology and clever scientists from Tübingen to America with a lot of money has shaken up Germany.”

In the meantime, it has become known that CureVac received a commitment from the European Union Commission for €80 million in funding following the alleged offer from the US. CEPI, which is co-financed by the German government, is also supporting CureVac’s vaccine project with \$8.3 million.

CureVac is developing the vaccine based on the molecule messenger-RNA (mRNA). According to CEPI CEO Richard Hatchett, this technology makes it possible “to develop a vaccine candidate for clinical testing within a few months, using the known gene sequence of the pathogen—a much faster process than previously possible.” Besides CureVac, the American company Moderna is also using this technology. They—and the German company BioNTech—are currently leading the race for a coronavirus vaccine.

CureVac owner Hopp recently stated that he hopes a vaccine will be available as early as the autumn. However, due to the necessary clinical tests, experts consider this to be unrealistic and expect the vaccine to take 12 to 18 months before it is ready.

The development of a vaccine would likely be much more

advanced if research on the SARS and MERS epidemics that broke out in China in 2002 and Saudi Arabia in 2012 had continued. Those pathogens are closely related to the current coronavirus. However, work on a vaccine was discontinued as the epidemics subsided, although experts predicted similar epidemics in the future.

Dr. Peter Hotez, who had worked in Texas on the development of a vaccine against the SARS virus, told the *Houston Chronicle* that his team had been looking for an investor or for grants for clinical trials, “But we just could not generate much interest.” Instead, the vaccine ended up in the refrigerator. “We could have had this ready to go and been testing the vaccine’s efficacy at the start of this new outbreak in China,” concluded Hotez.

The big pharmaceutical companies, which make billions of dollars in profits, have no economic interest in the development of such vaccines, which may never be used. Under the heading “How profit makes the fight for a coronavirus vaccine harder,” the British *Guardian* writes, “Vaccines for epidemics... suffer from a near total lack of interest from the markets that drive the pharmaceutical industry.”

It continues: “A success for these companies is a treatment for a widespread, persistent disease that they can sell every single year in perpetuity. The last industry blockbuster was Merck’s HPV vaccine Gardasil, in development for nearly 20 years, released in 2006 and still bringing in over £1bn annually. There is no way to easily apply their slow-burn research and profit model to an epidemic.”

The *Guardian* concludes: “The current setup is often the worst of both worlds—too slow to pick up research on new threats because the money isn’t there, and too quick to drop it if it can’t be sure the money will be there in the future. It’s a highly market-dependent system, and the market usually fails us.”

The global COVID-19 pandemic requires a socialist response: the global pooling of all resources and scientific knowledge, free of national and profit interests, to provide a vaccine in the shortest possible time that is available to all people throughout the world.



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