

How many must die for Wall Street?

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Deaths from the global coronavirus pandemic soared past 21,000 on Wednesday, continuing on an exponential trajectory. In the United States, at least 247 new deaths were recorded and the number of new cases grew by over 13,000.

Every day, more than 2,000 people are dying around the world. “It took 67 days from the first reported case to reach 100,000 cases, 11 days for the second 100,000 cases, and just four days for the third 100,000 cases,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organization.

Within a matter of days, the United States will have more cases of COVID-19 than any other country, including China and Italy, the initial epicenters of the disease. In New York, lines of ill people snake around city blocks, while a makeshift morgue is being constructed outside of New York’s Bellevue Hospital. In other New York City hospitals, refrigerated trucks are being used to store bodies in conditions doctors call “apocalyptic.”

Experts have repeatedly warned that the United States is at only the beginning of its outbreak and that cases will continue to soar. But already hospitals throughout the country—including those far away from the main centers of infection, such as the Beaumont and Henry Ford Health systems in Detroit—are filled to capacity.

Despite widespread claims that the pandemic afflicts only the elderly, the disease has proven dangerous to broad sections of society. Thirty-eight percent of people hospitalized in the US are between the ages of 20 and 54.

Meanwhile, despite the pleas of health experts, many workplaces throughout the country remain open. It is becoming increasingly clear that the disease is rapidly spreading in American workplaces, many of which do not have even the most basic safety measures in place to protect workers.

Two US Fiat Chrysler workers, including a worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant north of Detroit and another at the Kokomo Transmission Plant in Indiana, have died after becoming infected with COVID-19.

Nine workers in Amazon warehouses have tested positive for the virus. But despite the mounting toll, Amazon has made clear that it will neither shut down warehouses nor provide warehouse workers and delivery drivers with necessary protective equipment.

Even as the pandemic gathers strength, the Trump administration is escalating its campaign for a prompt return to work. Trump, disregarding the warnings of his own health experts, has called for America to be “open for business” by Easter, demanding to see “packed churches all over our country.”

In perhaps the most deranged expression of the outlook shared by Trump, the far-right *Federalist* online magazine, whose content Trump has repeatedly promoted on Twitter, published an article

urging its readers to deliberately infect themselves and their children with the virus in order to generate “herd immunity.”

But the denial of the dangers posed by COVID-19 and the urge that lives be sacrificed for the sake of the “economy” extends far beyond Trump and his supporters in the United States.

Trump’s points were echoed by his political ally and far-right ideologue Jair Bolsonaro, the president of Brazil, who declared, “The people will soon see that they were tricked by these governors and by the large part of the media when it comes to coronavirus.” He called the disease the “little flu.”

In Germany, the daily *Handelsblatt* ran a prominent interview with hedge fund manager Alexander Dibelius, who declared that the “collective shutdown of the economy” is “more frightening than this viral infection.”

These demands echoed similar statements among American oligarchs, including former Goldman Sachs executives Lloyd Blankfein and Gary Cohn. Cohn, formerly Trump’s chief economic adviser, declared that it was time “to start discussing the need for a date when the economy can turn back on.”

Wells Fargo CEO Dick Kovacevic, referring to “healthy workers below about 55,” stated, “We’ll gradually bring those people back and see what happens. Some of them will get sick, some may even die, I don’t know.”

Billionaire Tom Golisano, “smoking a Padron cigar on his patio in Florida,” complained to Bloomberg News, “The damages of keeping the economy closed as it is could be worse than losing a few more people.”

“You have to weigh the pros and cons,” he said.

According to researchers at Northwestern University, the “cons” of reopening businesses before the pandemic is under control could be 600,000 lives nationwide.

Under conditions in which the number of cases in much of the United States is doubling every day, and where there is no indication that the pandemic is under control, such proposals are totally reckless, displaying both ignorance and contempt for human life.

Indeed, the “value” of human life has become a major topic of discussion in the American press. The *New York Times* published an article Thursday headlined, “Shutdown Spotlights Economic Cost of Saving Lives.” The article cites former Obama adviser Cass Sunstein, who stated, “A program that saves younger people is better, in this sense, than an otherwise identical program that saves older people.”

Another Obama adviser, Ezekiel Emanuel, has repeatedly appeared as a media commentator during the pandemic, despite his having argued in 2014, in an effort to justify cuts to health care,

that people should not live past 75 because “society and families—and you—will be better off if nature takes its course swiftly and promptly.”

Society’s first and only concern must be to contain the pandemic as rapidly as possible. Social distancing measures, such as the closure of schools and workplaces, are a critical element of containing the disease, allowing for testing and contact tracing measures to be put in place, and spreading out cases so they do not overwhelm hospitals.

The United States and much of Western Europe, however, are not carrying out the practices recommended by the WHO. Hospitals throughout the United States are refusing to test all but the critically ill, making it impossible to track down the majority of cases and informing people who have been in contact with those infected.

And with hospitals already at capacity in much of the country, most cases are not being hospitalized, again contrary to WHO guidelines, exposing family members to infection.

In demanding that states lift mandatory quarantine orders, Trump, speaking for finance capital, raises the prospect of employees being compelled to work by means of threats and sanctions. Those who refuse to work in unsafe conditions risk being fired, and thus becoming ineligible for unemployment benefits. Workers will have to face the devastating choice of sacrificing the health of their own families and facing hunger, eviction and homelessness.

Even as the oligarchs demand that workers toil in unsafe conditions, workers are beginning to fight back. A wave of walkouts forced the closure of the Detroit automakers earlier this month. Workers across the logistics industry, including Amazon, have demanded safer working conditions, and postal workers in Brooklyn have reportedly refused to deliver mail. The hashtags #notdyingforwallstreet and #generalstrike have trended across Twitter.

No expense can be spared when it comes to reducing the number of infections and saving lives. The working class must demand that governments and employers take emergency action to address the crisis:

- **Close nonessential workplaces!** All workplaces not directly involved in medical care and the manufacture of medical products, or vital social necessities, must be shut for the duration of the pandemic! Workers out of work must receive their full income, and all resources must be made available to those affected by school closures, including paid time off and food assistance.

- **Safe working conditions!** All workers must have a safe work environment and be protected against the spread of the virus.

- **Accessible and universal testing!** No expense can be spared in making available free testing to all those who show symptoms.

- **Free high-quality treatment and equality of care!** The most advanced medical care must be made available to everyone, regardless of income or insurance coverage.

- **Protect refugees, prisoners and the homeless!** Everyone must have access to high-quality and clean living conditions to prevent the spread of the disease.

Workers should form rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees to coordinate their activities, mobilize their collective

strength, ensure that those who are sick receive social support, and monitor working conditions to ensure a safe environment.

The response to the disease cannot be left to the capitalist politicians, Democrats or Republicans. Their primary concern is to maintain the profits of the ruling elite through the inflation of the stock market.

On Wednesday, White House advisor Larry Kudlow made clear that the \$2 trillion “stimulus bill” that will soon be passed by the US Congress is in addition to some \$4 trillion in asset purchases, aimed at lifting the values of financial assets. The bill, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, includes tens of billions in direct subsidies to major corporations, and hundreds of billions more in loans.

The claim that society must choose between letting workers die and subjecting them to economic destitution is false. It assumes the permanence of the present capitalist form of social organization, in which the state gives trillions to the corporations but cannot ensure a livable income for workers if they do not work during an emergency.

Millions of lives can be saved if society allocates the necessary social resources to combatting the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring that all workers have the social support they need to stay home to preserve the safety of their families and the public. Instead of being bailed out with trillions of dollars in public funds, the major banks and corporations should be put under the democratic control of the population to ensure the health and safety of their workforces and all of humanity.

The alternative to the dystopian world of capitalism, in which the “cost” of human lives is measured against the drive for profit, is socialism, a global society based on the reorganization of world economy to meet social need.



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