Top US health adviser predicts millions will contract COVID-19 and 100,000–200,000 will die

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Over the weekend, the global public health disaster caused by the coronavirus pandemic reached a new point of crisis at its center, the United States. Nationally, confirmed cases of COVID-19 soared to more than 135,000, for the first time rising by more than 20,000 in a single day. Deaths doubled in two days, surpassing 2,400.

Worldwide, there are now 720,000 officially confirmed infections and 34,000 deaths caused by the pandemic.

In the current epicenter of the crisis in the US, New York state, the number of confirmed cases has risen to nearly 60,000 and the death toll has surpassed 1,000.

On Sunday, the two leading health officials on Trump's Coronavirus Task Force, Dr. Tony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Dr. Deborah Birx, the task force response coordinator, issued dire warnings of a rapid increase in infections and deaths. Fauci, appearing on CNN's "State of the Union" program Sunday morning, said he thought the crisis would fall between best-case and worst-case modeling scenarios, resulting in "millions of cases" in the US and "between 100,000 and 200,000 deaths."

Birx, appearing on NBCs "Meet the Press," admitted that the government expected the crisis to spread to every region of the country. "Every metro area should assume that they could have an outbreak equivalent to New York," she said.

The economic and social consequences of such a public health catastrophe are incalculable. As production and the real economy continue to contract, not even the trillions in cash infusions approved by both big business parties will be able to stabilize the financial markets, the central preoccupation of the financial oligarchy and its representative-in-chief, Trump.

Social and class tensions will continue to build, leading to an inevitable explosion of popular opposition. And the utter discrediting of all of the political institutions of American capitalism—which has proven incapable of preparing for or responding to a long-predicted flu pandemic—is fueling an enormous exacerbation of internal tensions within the ruling elite and its state.

The entire constitutional framework of the United States, including the relationship between the federal government and the states, is showing signs of fracturing.

In the course of two days, Trump was forced to reverse policies he had previously announced. On Saturday, he suddenly announced that he would likely proclaim in short order an "enforceable" quarantine of the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut tri-state region. This measure, ostensibly taken to contain the spread of the virus, would ban 30 million residents from leaving their states.

Already, the governors of Florida, Texas and Rhode Island have declared travelers from New York "persona non grata." In Florida and Rhode Island, the governors have mobilized the National Guard to man checkpoints at airports and on interstate highways to stop New Yorkers and order them to quarantine in place for 14 days. In Rhode Island, National Guard troops are going house to house to issue quarantine orders on New York residents, on pain of a jail term and fine.

Responding to Trump's announcement of a possible quarantine of New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo on Saturday called it a "federal declaration of war" that opened up a "civil war kind of discussion."

Under immense pressure from within his own party and his own administration, Trump dropped the proposal later Saturday, announcing instead a "strong" travel advisory for residents of the three states—a meaningless measure since all three states are already in lockdown.

At Sunday's daily coronavirus press briefing, Trump announced he was dropping his call for "opening up" the

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country by Easter, April 12, and ordering all workers back on the job. Instead, he extended until April 30 the advisory issued earlier in March effectively shuttering most public gathering places and many businesses. This was under conditions where a host of state governors, Republicans as well as Democrats, had made clear that they would ignore a federal order to ease "social distancing" restrictions and maintain their strict lockdown protocols.

The tensions between the federal and state governments had already been expressed in denunciations by Trump of the governors of Washington and Michigan for making mild criticisms of his failure to take action to carry out mass testing, provide life-saving equipment such as personal protective equipment, face masks and ventilators, or respond to hospitals being swamped by a flood of coronavirus patients. Just days before, he had dismissed pleas from New York Governor Cuomo for 30,000 to 40,000 ventilators, saying he did not believe anywhere near so many ventilators were needed.

Speaking earlier Sunday on CNN, Washington state Governor Jay Inslee, asked point blank if he would comply with an order from Trump to relax restrictions on movement and activity, said, "No. We need to make decisions based on science and reality."

In fact, whatever their tactical differences, all of the political representatives of big business in both parties are committed to the defense of the property and profits of the ruling elite, no matter the cost in human lives. Cuomo, for example, said on Saturday that if there were mass testing for the virus, workers who tested negative could be sent back to work immediately—despite the lack of safety measures to protect them and their families.

The mounting political crisis is compounded by reports from all over the country of a lack of vital supplies, swamped hospitals, inaccessibility of testing, and doctors facing the horrific demand to ration life-saving care and decide who will live and who will die. Reports abound of utter chaos in the production and distribution of critical equipment—all of it the product of decades of the plundering of society by the super-rich and the decay of basic health and social infrastructure.

California estimates it needs 10,000 ventilators, and has received 170 broken ones from the Trump administration, while Louisiana requested 5,000 from the national stockpile and received zero.

Hospitals in New York City are struggling to provide ventilators to the very sick. Photos have circulated on social media of exhausted doctors and nurses napping in surgery rooms to catch a moment's rest. The current supplies of masks, gowns, goggles and gloves, which help to prevent health care workers from being infected while they treat patients, will likely run out this week.

One particularly grim photo, shared by a nurse with Buzzfeed, shows the inside of one of the many makeshift morgues that have been set up to handle the hundreds of dead. "I took it to show to people," wrote the nurse. "It is the ghastly reality of what we deal with and where some of us have ended up already."

The state is being trailed by New Jersey, California, Michigan and Massachusetts. Similar scenarios are developing in other major metropolitan areas such as Detroit, New Orleans and Chicago.

Action can and must be taken to contain and reverse the spread of the disease and save lives. But this cannot be left up to the political representatives of the ruling class. At every point, the necessary measures—shutting down of all non-essential production, with no loss in income for the workers; safe conditions, monitored by health are professionals, for workers involved in essential production; full pay for all workers for the duration of the crisis; a coordinated plan to quickly produce the needed PPE, masks and ventilators; mass testing and contact tracing, at no expense to the population, and the full and equal care for all those who fall ill—conflict with the property and profit interests of the ruling corporate oligarchy.

Workers must raise these demands and link them to the measures needed to carry them out: Instead of bailing out the corporations and banks, nationalize them and turn them into public utilities under democratic control, expropriate the obscene fortunes of the financial oligarchs and use the money to provide equipment, build hospitals and compensate workers who lose their jobs.

The alternative to millions of deaths and the destruction of jobs and living standards is the struggle to put an end to the capitalist system and replace it with socialism.

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