

World Health Organization warns against premature ending of social distancing measures

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As countries around the world openly discuss how to send workers back to plants, warehouses and offices—even as the coronavirus pandemic rages on—the World Health Organization has warned that ending social distancing measures prematurely and without sufficient preparation can rapidly accelerate the ongoing public health crisis.

During Monday’s WHO press conference, Executive Director Dr. Michael Ryan stressed “it would be very inadvisable to just lift lockdown if the number of cases coming through the hospital is already at a level where your occupancy of beds is nearly at a hundred percent. You need to be in a position where you now have free beds in your system so that you’re managing and coping with your case load.”

He added, “You’ll see in somewhere like Korea, 2–6 percent of their samples are testing positive. Last week in New York 37 percent of tested samples were positive.” That the rate of positive cases is so high indicates a large number of undetected people infected with the coronavirus.

These themes were further developed in a briefing on the situation in Europe Tuesday, when WHO spokesperson Christian Lindmeier made clear: “One of the most important parts is not to let go of the measures too early in order not to have a fall back again.”

The warnings of the WHO come as the number of deaths worldwide approaches 82,000 and the number of officially confirmed cases bursts past 1.4 million. The United States alone accounts for nearly 400,000 of the cases and almost 13,000 deaths, with a record 1,970 dead from the virus in the past 24 hours.

While Ryan and Lindmeier did not name names, they are no doubt referencing recent press conferences given by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, in which he stated, “We are going to have to restart the economy.” President Donald Trump stated, along the same lines, “We want to get [the economy] opened soon,” justifying this by asserting that the “signs are that our strategy is totally working” and that

“maybe we’re getting to the very top of the curve.”

The line being put forward by Trump, Cuomo and the political establishment is that mitigation measures have proven successful and as the number of new cases declines the country should begin thinking about sending workers back to the factories, schools, warehouses and offices en masse sometime sooner rather than later. It is not the massive loss of life that ultimately bothers Trump and the financial oligarchs, but that “the cure should not be worse than the disease [for the financial markets].” Workers must be sent back to work in order for corporations to keep making billions off their labor.

Such a back-to-work order would be disastrous for the working class. First, Trump’s comments dismiss situations like that in Michigan, where the number of cases and deaths is still clearly trending upward. Second, as long as there are any new cases, the pandemic can flare up again, potentially worse than before, if people are forced to work in close proximity while the virus is still active. Historical data on pandemics is very clear that lockdowns should not be ended as the number of new cases is declining, or even when new cases reach zero, but when there have been no new cases for a few weeks or even a month.

As stated by the WHO’s Dr. Ryan, “To chart a path out, you have to build strong public health capacity to take over from the lockdown. In other words, the lockdown is pushing the disease down by putting people back in their homes and separating communities. But once you raise the lockdown you have to have an alternative method to suppress the infection. The way to do that is active case finding, testing, isolation of cases, tracking of contacts, quarantine of contacts, and strong community education.”

Such measures have yet to be placed into action within the US, notwithstanding Trump’s boasts that the US has done the most testing in the world. This has only been true for the past few weeks, before which the number of tests conducted was criminally low, allowing the coronavirus to spread in

the population for weeks. And testing is still not available for the population as a whole, or for health care workers on the front line, but remains reserved only for those who are hospitalized with sufficient symptoms, as defined by changing criteria. The implication is that the true extent of the virus is still unknown and pursuing a relaxation of mitigation efforts will be disastrous for the public at large.

It should also be noted that the number of detected cases is related to the amount of testing done. The number of confirmed new cases in New York decreased in previous days as did the number of tests performed by the state. Testing only symptomatic cases indicates that their contacts and suspected individuals are still uncounted. This implies that the scope of the outbreak is more enormous than the numbers suggest.

Alongside laying the ground work to force workers back to work, Trump has also begun to heavily criticize the World Health Organization for its response to the pandemic in order to undermine its stark although understated objections to Trump's designs. In a tweet Tuesday, he ranted, "The WHO really blew it. For some reason, funded largely by the United States, yet very China centric. We will be giving that a good look. Fortunately, I rejected their advice on keeping our borders open to China early on. Why did they give us such a faulty recommendation?"

He continued these themes at yesterday's press conference, claiming, "They called it wrong. They could have called it months earlier. They would have known. They should've known and they probably did know. So, we'll be looking into them very carefully. And we're going to put a hold on money spent to the WHO."

This was picked up in major news publications, including the *Wall Street Journal*. The newspaper, in an article published by its editorial board on Sunday headlined "WHO's bows to Beijing have harmed the global response to the pandemic," railed that the agency's "misinformation" allowed the virus to "spread to several countries" because of its "canoodling with Beijing." It at the same time gushed about Trump's travel ban against China as "slowing the spread of the virus," despite the fact that the US has more than a quarter of the world's coronavirus cases as a result of the administration's inaction in January, February and the first part of March.

This is not the first time the Rupert Murdoch-owned publication has attacked the WHO for its supposedly Chinese-centric focus. As early as February 13, the newspaper was writing, "WHO bowed to Chinese pressure" in not declaring a public emergency early in January. In fact, WHO did declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 29, before the US assembled its coronavirus task force and well before Trump

declared a national emergency. It should be mentioned that Trump had been made aware of the potential consequences for the US by Peter Navarro, one of Trump's high-ranking assistants, and Alex Azar, head of Health and Human Services, before the WHO's declaration.

Of course, neither Trump, the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* nor any of the big banks they serve are ultimately concerned about the medical response of the WHO. They see a mortal threat in that "China inevitably gains more international clout as its economy grows." This is especially true as China's economy begins to reopen after having been closed since January, while that of the US remains essentially in lockdown.

These are the calculations made by the American ruling elite. They see China emerging from the pandemic in a stronger geopolitical position, which cannot be tolerated. There is no thought given to the tens of thousands that have already died, the hundreds of thousands of infected and the hundreds of millions who face the loss of their livelihoods as a result of this pandemic. They do not consider the ramifications of their actions for the working class by sending them back to face a resurgence of the infection.

The working class must make its own calculations, based on the preservation of human life and the compensation of all those who cannot yet safely return to work. This must be based on the broadest struggle against the control by the capitalist class over all aspects of economic life in the drive for private profit. The resources that have been placed at the disposal of the banks and major corporations must be redirected towards ending this pandemic and establishing a socialist economy based on the interests of humanity on a global scale.



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