

As Trump attacks health experts, World Health Organization warns against early return to work

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The world has surged past 1.5 million new cases of COVID-19 and over 90,000 deaths, with the United States nearly 300,000 cases worse than Spain, the second-place country. After suggesting at Tuesday's White House briefing that his administration's efforts on the pandemic had achieved "light at the end of the tunnel," President Trump dumbfounded journalists by asserting that the United States would halt funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) in response to his perception that the WHO has been critical of US policy, despite the critical role the WHO has played in the worldwide battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We're going to put a hold on money sent to the WHO. We're going to put a very powerful hold on it. They called it wrong. They call it wrong. They really, they missed the call." He followed this with a tweet, "The WHO really blew it. For some reason, largely funded 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?"

In actuality, the WHO was notified by Chinese health officials in early January of an outbreak of a novel virus and, subsequently, they had been holding briefings and press releases on developments in Wuhan as the world was waking up to the concerns emanating from China that an epidemic was rapidly moving through the city. By the end of January, the WHO had elevated their concerns, declaring the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

Also, the WHO's position on travel bans has remained consistent, stating that such restrictions make a response to a pandemic more challenging by impacting response time and diverting resources. Travel bans did not prevent the spread of the contagion. Moreover, it has been clearly

demonstrated that the time the breathing room bought by the massive lockdown across Hubei province was mostly squandered by the US administration.

The health agency is notoriously strapped for cash, with the annual dues paid by member states, making up 20 percent of their budget, having been frozen for more than a decade. Its present budget is just over \$4.8 billion, most of which comes from private donors and voluntary contributions from the member states. According to STAT Health, the US has provided the WHO with \$893 million during the agency's current two-year funding period. The United States provides 14.67 percent of the WHO's finances. Trump has already proposed that he would cut funding to the WHO by half, from \$122 million to less than \$58 million in 2021.

Behind Trump's displays of animus and disregard for the WHO is the need to undermine their authority on providing counsel to nations on combating the pandemic based on factual data. The White House, responding to the demands of the financial markets, is looking to redirect the narrative on the course of the epidemic by deluding the public to believe that the pandemic has mostly been vanquished and workers need to return to their place of work and reignite the economic engines.

On Wednesday, the WHO's European office said despite "positive signs" from some countries, it is too early to scale back measures aimed at containing the spread of the coronavirus. Hans Kluge, the WHO regional director of Europe, said at a news conference, "Now is not the time to relax measures. It is the time to once again double and triple our collective efforts to drive towards suppression with the whole support of society." Kluge called on "all countries" to strengthen their efforts in several main areas.

Firstly, protecting health service workers, including

training and making sure they have the necessary support structures. Second, authorities needed to focus on stopping and slowing the spread of COVID-19 by using public health measures aimed at separating “healthy people from suspected and probable cases.”

At yesterday’s WHO Press briefing, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was immediately inundated by journalists to respond to President Trump’s threat to cut funding and his criticism of the WHO’s relationship with China. The director’s response was much more straightforward than his usual evasive answers. He also revealed he had received death threats in recent months.

He challenged his critics by stating, “When there is a crack at the national level between political parties, between religious groups or between other groups, that’s when the virus gets a hold in a crack that it can exploit and can defeat us ... at the end of the day, the people belong to all political parties. The focus of all political parties should be to save their people. Please don’t politicize this virus. It exploits the differences you have at the national level. If you want to be exploited and you want to have many more body bags, then you do it. If you don’t want many more body bags, then refrain from politicizing it. My short message is ‘quarantine politicizing COVID.’ The unity of your country will be very important to defeat this dangerous virus. Without unity, we assure you, any country that may have a better system will be in trouble and more crisis ... there is no need to score political points using COVID. It’s like playing with fire.”

He continued, “The world is getting smaller and smaller. We need solidarity and unity more than ever before. It has become more important than ever before. Anything that starts in one place affects the whole world. We can’t live in our nation-state boundaries. Globalization is a must. Something we should accept and live with it. That means interdependence and helping each other.” He challenged the United States and China for “honest leadership.

In response to this declaration, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published new guidelines yesterday that detail how essential employees can return to work even if they have been exposed to infected individuals, as long as they do not have symptoms.

The White House also received a report today from the National Academy of Sciences that the spread of the coronavirus may not decrease in the summer as some had forecast. Preliminary findings did indicate that they found

fewer cases of COVID-19 in warmer climates. Still, as Australia and Iran, both warmer countries than average, are experiencing rapid virus spread, they suggested that such assumptions may be erroneous.

As the WHO director-general noted, “Still there are many unknowns [about the nature of the virus], and we don’t know how it will behave in the future. It’s very contagious as the flu but at the same time more fatal than the flu.”

Despite the WHO’s official adherence to scientific and public health principles, it is an entity created by world capitalism, part of the United Nations apparatus originally founded by the imperialist powers who won World War II, along with Stalin and the USSR. Its existence is based on voluntary dues paid by nation-states and private donors (most of them wealthy capitalists), and it in no way challenges the profit system, even when, as today the conflict between the profit system and human life is so acutely posed.

The WHO’s professed principles inevitably run into direct conflict with the imperialist powers and their policy of malign neglect. Despite the director’s well-intentioned words, the fundamental obstacle standing in the way of global solidarity is the conflict of rival capitalist nation-states, each with their own national interest in defending the wealth of their own national financial oligarchs.

The epidemic has exposed the ruling elite’s utter indifference to the plight of the working class and the life on this planet. The WHO cannot implore and hope that the G20 will find its senses. This reality was demonstrated at the end of the press briefing, when Director-General Tedros concluded by extending his thanks to the United States for their generous support of the organization he heads.



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