

As COVID-19 death toll mounts, US ruling class demands a more rapid return to work

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After a week in which more than 10,000 Americans died from COVID-19, the US media and political establishment have launched a concerted effort to get workers back to work, even as the pandemic continues to spread and kill in the United States and internationally.

This effort is being spearheaded above all by the Trump administration. During the most recent coronavirus task force media briefing, Trump claimed that country as a whole is “doing really well” and “doing much better than we thought it would.”

Task force coordinator Deborah Birx said the White House was “ensuring that everybody gets optimal care,” a claim that went unchallenged by the press even as hospitals such as Elmhurst in New York City were still inundated with patients.

Throughout the week, Trump repeatedly called for US businesses to “open with a big bang.” Members of the administration have claimed that Trump is seeking to reopen much of the American economy on May 1.

These demands contradict the warnings of global health officials. Last week, Dr. Hans Kluge, the UN body’s regional director for Europe, stated bluntly, “Now is not the time to relax measures. ... This is not the time to lower our guard,” he added, pointing to a danger of a resurgence of the pandemic.

Trump’s demands to prematurely reopen businesses are being echoed internationally. Spain is planning to restart construction and manufacturing. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has eyed summer for a loosening of lockdowns and a return to work.

Little mention is being made of the actual figures in the United States. The total number of coronavirus cases nears 560,000, and the deaths are just under 22,000. Significantly, the number of recovered patients is less than 32,000, an indication both of the length of

time those infected must suffer and a warning of how many are still sick and may die from the pandemic.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the top US public health advisers under Trump, told CNN’s Jake Tapper, “When one starts to relax some of those restrictions, we know that there will be people getting infected.” Nonetheless, the administration was considering “rolling re-entry” of individual states back into normal economic operations, “maybe next month.”

Tapper did not ask, and Fauci did not explain, how states will handle workers traveling from those that are not locked down to those that are, and back again, continuing the spread of the pandemic.

Various news outlets have amplified the return-to-work message.

On the segment “Global Public Square,” Fareed Zakaria criticized early predictions that the number of needed hospital beds as “way too high.” He did not attempt to reconcile that statement with the mass graves for COVID-19 corpses being dug on Hart Island in New York City or the shortage of body bags at Sinai-Grace Hospital in Detroit.

Zakaria claimed, “In the places with the best testing ... the numbers of who are actually infected suggest a fatality rate similar to the seasonal flu.” This would result in “fewer than 40,000 deaths,” rather than the 100,000 to 240,000 earlier predicted by the Trump administration. He concluded by intoning that while this “is still a tragedy” and “we should be glad that the work we’ve done to abide by social distancing has done some good ... it has come at a price.”

The “price” for Zakaria and his ilk is not the lives lost to the disease, but the collapse of the Dow Jones index in March and the fact that the markets have not since recovered to their record highs of February. Billions of dollars in wealth have been and will be lost, reflected in

projections by Goldman Sachs that the US gross domestic product will contract by 24 percent from April to June of this year.

In the ruling class, there is no genuine concern for the price of the pandemic being placed on workers. It was reported Friday by the *Washington Post* that Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia is using his authority to limit who qualifies for the supposedly expanded unemployment benefits passed by Trump, even as nearly 17 million workers have been forced off the job.

Under Scalia's orders, "gig economy" workers such as Uber and Lyft drivers are less likely to get benefits, and companies now have an easier time denying their employees coronavirus-related sick and family leave.

Nor is there any mention made of the massive budget shortfalls at the state and local levels. New York, Ohio and Illinois are estimated to lose billions in tax revenue while having huge coronavirus costs, while cities including Phoenix, San Antonio and Washington, D.C. are predicting shortfalls of tens of millions. Nationally, states and municipalities are expected to lose between \$158 billion and \$203 billion through 2021.

State and local governments are already eyeing massive social cuts to make up for these deficits, including schools, art programs, public libraries, as well as pensions for state employees. Pennsylvania has withheld payroll for 9,000 of its workers who have been forced to stay at home. "I do think cities across the country are looking at some degree of austerity," San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg said.

What none of the mayors, governors, members of the media or the White House are discussing seriously is what is actually needed for workers to return to their jobs safely. World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Friday, "Important factors to consider are, first, the transmission is controlled; second, that sufficient public health and medical services are available; third, that outbreak risks in special settings like longterm care facilities are minimized; fourth, that preventive measures are in place in workplaces, schools and other places where it's essential for people to go."

None of these conditions exist in the US or in any other of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. At most, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stated that employers "should" provide masks, gloves and other protective equipment and that they

"may" want to provide their workers with sick leave. Similar "guidance" has been provided by the public health organizations in other countries.

Without the resources being spent to put these measures in place, any back-to-work order will be a bloodbath for workers. The unsafe and unsanitary conditions will expose millions to the disease, and rapidly accelerate a pandemic from one that has infected millions to one that will infect tens or hundreds of millions of people around the globe.



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