

Trump administration's "back to work" drive will fuel pandemic

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US President Donald Trump announced Thursday a set of "guidelines" for states to end social distancing measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, setting the stage for businesses to reopen throughout the country.

The new guidelines will fuel the coronavirus pandemic and lead to a sharp increase in deaths. In an indication of the mad rush to resume production, Boeing announced that it will begin aircraft production and send 27,000 workers back as early as Monday.

These moves come as the US continues to post record deaths, and the United States still does not have enough tests to contain the disease. More than 2,000 deaths were reported yesterday, and more than 8,000 over the past three days.

There is still widespread community transmission, meaning that once social distancing measures are ended a second wave of cases and deaths will follow. The real fatality rate, moreover, far exceeds official statistics. Yesterday, reports began to emerge of mass casualties, of at least 29 and possibly as many as 60, at one nursing home facility in Queens, New York.

Workplaces have been a major center of transmission for the pandemic, with dozens of cases and multiple deaths linked to individual workplaces. More than 540 cases of coronavirus have been recorded at one meatpacking plant in South Dakota.

Trump's plan is not grounded in any real scientific analysis of the pandemic. It is not conceived from the standpoint of public health, but to ensure that major corporations are allowed to get back to the business of squeezing profits out of workers as quickly as possible.

Now that Wall Street and major corporations have exploited the COVID-19 crisis to receive a massive bailout from the Treasury and Federal Reserve even larger than that following the 2008 financial crisis, the

ruling class is determined to send workers back into America's factories, no matter the death toll.

Trump's back-to-work campaign aims to normalize death on a massive scale, in which outbreaks of COVID-19 are seen as the cost of doing business. With government restrictions ended, employees who refuse to work under unsafe conditions will face the threat of being fired and becoming ineligible for unemployment insurance. As far as the ruling class is concerned, if workers die, they will simply be replaced.

The plan urges states to reopen businesses if they can demonstrate a "downward trajectory" of cases over a fourteen-day period. This proposal has no relation to the statements and assessments of epidemiologists and health experts, and it contradicts the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Public health experts have repeatedly warned that reopening businesses too soon could cause major new outbreaks. Lifting "physical distancing measures" too early "can result in the disease returning if you don't have the public health measures to deal with the virus," warned WHO epidemiologist Maria D. Van Kerkhove.

Wall Street, recognizing the significance of the proposal for boosting corporate profits, surged in response to the news, with Dow Jones Industrial Average futures up by 820 points late on Thursday.

The plan is the result of a campaign by the Trump administration and the media to downplay the severity of the disease. To this end, the media has simply ignored the fact that the United States posted a record 2,600 deaths on Wednesday, and that the number of deaths has soared from 4,000 at the beginning of this month to over 34,000.

Over the past two days, the media has highlighted a handful of protests, organized by extreme right-wing forces, demanding a return to work. The ruling class is

attempting to manufacture a narrative that the population is demanding an end to social distancing measures in order to justify a return to work.

“There is no plan for re-opening. Just re-opening,” said Yale epidemiologist Gregg Gonsalves. “No national scale-up of testing capacity, contact tracing, isolation, PPE, economic support for ordinary Americans. It flies in the face of public health and economic advice. It’s destructive, deadly.”

“There are no metrics of any kind in the guidelines,” said science journalist Laurie Garrett. “The plan does have ‘recommendations’ for testing and tracing, but no measurable benchmarks for it, just left up to the discretion/perception of individual governors.”

The United States now has three times more cases than any other country in the world. In New York, an epicenter of the crisis, 1.1 percent of the population has tested positive for the virus. Nationally, the COVID-19 test positivity rate is 20 percent, indicating that tests have been conducted mainly among those already showing symptoms, and that far more people need tests than are able to get tested.

By contrast, South Korea has only 2 percent of tests reporting positive, an order of magnitude less than the United States. Canada, Germany and Denmark have rates between 6 and 8 percent.

Hospitals in the United States are filled to capacity, and funeral homes and morgues have no room to put the bodies.

During his press conference Thursday, Trump praised his government’s response to the disease because, just a few months into the outbreak, the United States has had fewer deaths than scenarios predicted by epidemiologists over the course of several years.

“Our strategy to slow the spread has saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Models predicted between 1.5 million and 2.2 million US deaths,” he said. “And between 100,000 and 240,000 deaths with mitigation. It’s looking like we will come far under even these lowest numbers.”

Because aggressive social distancing measures carried out throughout the country have led to a stabilization of the rate of new cases, Trump falsely argues that it is now appropriate to reopen businesses. In fact, social distancing measures like business and school closures are effective only to the extent that they create the conditions for sufficient testing, quarantine,

and contact tracing.

Trump is cynically exploiting the widespread social dislocation caused by the pandemic to pressure workers to return to work. Under conditions in which millions of workers have received neither unemployment payments nor emergency stimulus measures, workers are left to choose between returning to work under unsafe conditions or being unable to feed their families.

But the claim that humanity must choose between letting workers die and subjecting them to economic destitution is false. This dichotomy assumes the prerogatives of the capitalist system, in which the state gives trillions to the corporations but won’t ensure a livable income for workers.

The first priority in this pandemic must be saving human lives. This is only possible through a massive expansion of public health care spending to fund an enormous ramp-up of testing, quarantine, and contact tracing. Social distancing measures must remain in place until this capacity is created.

The demand by corporations and the White House for a premature return to work will spark widespread opposition within the working class. Workers must demand safe working conditions and the continued closure of non-essential businesses.

The struggle for the defense of workers’ health, safety and economic security is inseparable from the fight to end the capitalist system that is ultimately responsible for the pandemic, and to replace it with socialism.



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