

US propaganda campaign promotes lies blaming China for COVID-19

Alex Lantier
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In recent days, ruling circles in America and Europe have launched an aggressive media campaign promoting the claim that China is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. This goes hand in hand with a wave of lawsuits targeting China, calls for China to pay trillions of dollars in damages to America and its European allies, and renewed US naval deployments to the South China Sea.

At the center of this incendiary campaign are unsubstantiated allegations that the coronavirus causing COVID-19 escaped from a virology lab in Wuhan, China, the pandemic's first epicenter. This campaign also legitimizes and fuels false rumors circulating on social media that COVID-19 is the product of Chinese germ-warfare programs. All these statements are groundless and fly in the face of repeated statements by leading scientists in America and internationally.

These are political lies as shameless as US lies in 2002 that Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction," which served as a pretext for an illegal US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The genome of the coronavirus causing COVID-19 has been mapped out in China and examined by biologists internationally. They have established that the virus is a previously-unknown, naturally-occurring coronavirus that originated in bats, which was not previously in the possession of any lab.

Nonetheless, a relentless campaign is underway, darkly insinuating that COVID-19 is the product of malevolent Chinese activity. Last weekend, as US COVID-19 cases topped 730,000 and deaths neared 39,000, US President Donald Trump speculated that China deliberately provoked the pandemic: "It could have been stopped in China before it started and it wasn't, and the whole world is suffering because of it. ... If it was a mistake, a mistake is a mistake. But if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences."

Trump's speculation about whether China is "knowingly responsible" for COVID-19 followed a barrage of articles in Democratic Party media attacking China and blaming Wuhan labs. "Most experts say there is no evidence that China deliberately engineered the virus as a weapon," the *Washington Post* wrote in an editorial, admitting that such claims are "conspiracy talk." This claim that "most" experts oppose conspiracy theories about Chinese germ warfare is itself misleading, in fact: all scientific experts reject this unfounded and incendiary claim.

"A more troubling explanation is that the coronavirus was inadvertently spread from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which had carried out research on bat coronaviruses," the *Post* continued. It denounced China, writing that the "Chinese model—deception, cover-up and rewriting history—is part of the problem, not the solution."

These lies all fly in the face of established science regarding the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that causes COVID-19, reviewed in dozens of articles in leading scientific publications. In one such article, "The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2," in *Nature*, a team of US and UK biologists wrote, "Here we review what can be deduced about the origin of SARS-CoV-2 from comparative analysis of genomic data. We offer a perspective on the notable features of the SARS-CoV-2 genome and discuss scenarios

by which they could have arisen. Our analyses clearly show that SARS-CoV-2 is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus."

Based on a detailed analysis of the genome and internal structure of the virus, first provided by Chinese scientists, the authors concluded that zoonotic transfer (that is, passage of a virus occurring naturally in animals to humans) led to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2. They wrote, "if genetic manipulation had been performed, one of the several reverse-genetic systems available for betacoronaviruses would probably have been used. However, the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone. Instead, we propose two scenarios that can plausibly explain the origin of SARS-CoV-2: (i) natural selection in an animal host before zoonotic transfer; and (ii) natural selection in humans following zoonotic transfer."

The sudden spread of new, deadly viruses jumping to humans from other animal carriers is not a Chinese, but a well-known international phenomenon. COVID-19's emergence from a bat virus that infected humans in live-animal markets recalls the emergence of the first SARS pneumonia virus in China in 2002. However, the emergence in Africa in 1981 of the HIV virus that causes AIDS, or of human monkeypox in the United States in 2003 are examples of the same natural phenomenon.

These diseases were cited in an article by a group of US physicians in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, titled "Escaping Pandora's Box—Another Novel Coronavirus," analyzing how the sudden spread of the previously-unknown COVID-19 virus could occur. It explained that this type of virus, whose RNA genetic material is "genetically error-prone," can mutate with great speed and suddenly become infectious in humans.

"SARS-CoV-2 did not escape from a jar," they wrote. "RNA sequences closely resemble those of viruses that silently circulate in bats, and epidemiologic information implicates a bat-origin virus infecting unidentified animal species sold in China's live-animal markets. ... It took the genome of the human species 8 million years to evolve by 1 percent. Many animal RNA viruses can evolve by more than 1 percent in a matter of days. It is not difficult to understand why we increasingly see the emergence of zoonotic viruses."

Nonetheless, with total contempt for scientific evidence, US media and officials are promoting unsubstantiated, lurid claims that the virus spread from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). This institute was developed in 2015 as a P4 high-security lab in collaboration with America's National Laboratory of Galveston in Texas and France's National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM) to investigate highly dangerous pathogens. Another biological research lab in Wuhan has a lower P2 biosecurity rating.

Peter Navarro, a US trade negotiator, has claimed that the most likely source of the pandemic is the WIV, demanding that China prove its labs did not have the COVID-19 virus. "What we know is that the ground zero for this virus was within a few miles of that lab," Navarro said. "If you simply do an Occam's razor approach that the simplest explanation is

probably the most likely, I think it's incumbent on China to prove that it wasn't that lab."

Before publishing its editorial attacking China, the *Washington Post* carried a column by Josh Rogin, claiming Wuhan labs had, if not manufactured, then at least leaked the COVID-19 virus. The "Chinese government still refuses to answer basic questions about the origin of the novel coronavirus while suppressing any attempts to examine whether either lab was involved," Rogin claimed, citing an unnamed US national security official: "Right now, the ledger on the side of it leaking from the lab is packed with bullet points and there's almost nothing on the other side."

Just as Washington placed Iraq in 2002 in the impossible position of having to prove that it did not have its nonexistent WMDs, US officials are placing China in an impossible position of proving a negative—that it did not have the virus in its possession before the pandemic. The *Post's* claim in this context that the "ledger" points to Chinese responsibility for the virus is a reactionary fraud. In reality, an overwhelming weight of scientific evidence shows that China did not have and could not have had the virus in its possession before the pandemic.

Not only have WIV officials repeatedly denied that they had samples of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 before the pandemic, but scientists internationally have strongly rejected claims that the WIV had the virus. Scimex, the Australia-New Zealand science news site, solicited comments from biologists on the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, including from Edward Holmes, an evolutionary virology professor at the University of Sydney.

Holmes wrote, "The closest known relative of SARS-CoV-2 is a bat virus named RaTG13, which was kept at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. There is some unfounded speculation that this virus was the origin of SARS-CoV-2. However, (i) RaTG13 was sampled from a different province of China (Yunnan) to where COVID-19 first appeared; and (ii) the level of genome sequence divergence between SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 is equivalent to an average of 50 years (and at least 20 years) of evolutionary change. Hence, SARS-CoV-2 was not derived from RaTG13."

The *Nature* study also explained why scientists reject claims that laboratory manipulation of other viruses could have produced the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It pointed to totally new features of this virus, including a polybasic cleavage site and molecules called O-linked glycans on its surface. These features are thought to be critical in making the virus dangerous: they protect the spike the virus uses to bind to ACE2 receptors and penetrate human cells from detection by the immune system. The *Nature* article stressed that it is highly unlikely that such features could have emerged while another virus was manipulated in a lab.

They wrote, "a hypothetical generation of SARS-CoV-2 by cell culture or animal passage would have required prior isolation of a progenitor virus with very high genetic similarity, which has not been described. Subsequent generation of a polybasic cleavage site would have then required repeated passage in cell culture or animals with ACE2 receptors similar to those of humans, but such work has also not previously been described. Finally, the generation of the predicted O-linked glycans is also unlikely to have occurred due to cell-culture passage, as such features suggest the involvement of an immune system."

The question that must be posed is why the imperialist ruling classes are launching a propaganda campaign without any scientific basis, insinuating that China sought to poison the world—though a Chinese city, Wuhan, was itself the first victim.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

To understand the current anti-Chinese propaganda campaign, it is worth recalling the plague pandemic of 14th-century Europe. A third of the population died from a disease that could neither be understood nor treated, at a time when the existence of viruses and bacteria was unknown. Fear and panic gripped populations that were totally defenseless against the plague. As rumors spread that the disease was caused by Jews poisoning wells, Christian populations rioted, organizing pogroms and massacring Jewish populations in cities across Western Europe.

Modern science and technology have truly astonishing power and potential. Even amid the most dangerous pandemic in over a century, humanity faces an entirely different situation from that facing plague victims 700 years ago. It can identify pathogens, test for them, and start working on drugs or vaccines to treat them only weeks after the outbreak even of previously-unknown diseases like COVID-19. It allows for contact tracing and the isolation and treatment of the sick that could slash infection and fatality rates. Humanity could be sustained with food and medicine produced and distributed by the labor of only a small part of the world's working population. Billions could thus shelter at home, awaiting the end of the contagion and the development of effective treatments.

The reason these techniques cannot be fully employed is the social backwardness of capitalism. Decades of austerity have shuttered hospitals and medical facilities, starved research on coronavirus vaccines of funding, slashed workers' living standards and diverted trillions of dollars into the pockets of super-wealthy elites in America and Europe. Governments did not employ basic tracing and quarantine measures—or even get an adequate supply of face masks—in the world's wealthiest countries. Instead, a tiny financial aristocracy in America and Europe enriched itself with trillions of dollars in bank and corporate bailouts, while workers and small businesspeople face joblessness, financial ruin and even hunger and starvation in addition to the fear of COVID-19.

Today, the ruling class is trying to push masses of people backwards, into a barbaric hunt for scapegoats. In a strategy that political anti-Semites like the fascists of 20th-century Europe would have easily understood, it works to degrade working class consciousness with appeals to fear and ethnic hatreds. All of the complex scientific questions and social contradictions are swept aside with one simple, hysterical and totally false slogan: Blame China!

The anti-Chinese campaign in the ruling class has nothing to do with treating the disease, and everything to do with continuing the policy of trade war and military escalation with which Washington and its European allies had been threatening China for years before the pandemic.

As the US Navy dispatched ships to the South China Sea, the imperialist ruling elites are demanding massive, totally unsubstantiated financial penalties from China. A class action suit suing China for billions of dollars over COVID-19 is already under way in Florida, and the US state of Missouri has also announced that it will sue China. In Britain, the right-wing Henry Jackson Society think-tank demanded China pay \$6.3 trillion in reparations to Washington and the European powers, while the German newspaper *Bild* called for Berlin to initially demand \$127 billion to \$382 billion from China, citing COVID-19's damage to the German economy.

Incendiary statements that China is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of US and European citizens, together with demands for massive financial penalties that would bankrupt China, have an unmistakable political logic. Nearly 20 years after the Iraq war, the imperialist powers are tobogganing eyes closed towards another, even greater catastrophe: conflict with China, a nuclear-armed power at the heart of the world economy.

It is critical for workers and youth in America, Europe and internationally to reject this reactionary and baseless imperialist campaign against China. Chinese workers, who underwent a long and draconian confinement period to limit the COVID-19 pandemic, and whose labor is producing millions of masks, respirators and other key medical equipment

being sent around the world, are not the enemies of workers in other countries. They are their class brothers and sisters in a common struggle against imperialist war and the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for the officials and media denouncing China in America and Europe, they stand exposed as perpetrators of a fascistic campaign to incite national hatreds based on lies.



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