

“Back to work” campaign in the US will lead to surge in coronavirus deaths

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The American ruling class is attempting to rapidly resume production and send workers back to work. The consequences of this policy, if workers allow it to be carried out, are clear: Countless thousands of more people will get gravely sick or die.

There is no scientific basis for a return to work from the standpoint of public health. The number of new reported COVID-19 cases in the US continues at about 30,000 every day, with more than 2,000 new deaths. The total official death toll as of Thursday evening was close to 50,000. Globally, there were more than 60,000 new cases reported yesterday, and the death toll is quickly approaching 200,000.

The official figures, however, deliberately understate the scale of cases and deaths. According to studies based on “excess deaths” over pre-coronavirus averages, the actual number of deaths in the US and Western Europe is at least twice as high as the numbers that have been reported. The number of new cases in the US is no longer accelerating, but this is largely due to the fact that testing has been systematically curtailed.

Despite this reality, a number of states, encouraged by the Trump administration’s new “guidelines” released last week, are moving aggressively to relax social distancing measures. Georgia is opening many businesses today. South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Montana and several other states have already begun to open businesses or are planning on doing so over the next week. Other states are preparing to remove restrictions on nonessential production by May 1, the date proposed by the Trump administration as a target.

Even the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), which has previously been cited by the Trump administration to justify an early return to work, noted that Georgia in particular could not safely reduce social distancing measures until mid-June at the earliest. The state reported

881 new cases yesterday, a significant increase over the previous day.

Individual corporations are moving even more quickly. Airline manufacturer and defense contractor Boeing has already sent 27,000 workers back to work in the state of Washington, along with thousands of workers in the Philadelphia area. Both Washington and Pennsylvania still have lockdowns in place, but Boeing is evading these restrictions by having its operations categorized as “essential.”

German automaker Volkswagen is set to begin production at its plants in the US on Monday. Other auto companies are also attempting to send workers back on the line. The United Auto Workers, a bribed tool of corporate management, told its local leaders to begin preparing to “resume production schedules in the near future.”

Workers are to be sent back to work with absolutely no protections in place to ensure their safety. The Labor Department’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), nominally in charge of workplace safety, has not required businesses that open to do anything. The Labor Department also announced last week that it would not carry out any workplace inspections, outside of health care and emergency response, after economic activity resumes.

The Trump administration, moreover, has made clear that it will protect corporations from liability if workers contract the coronavirus on the job. Trump declared at a press conference earlier this week, “We just don’t want [legal liability] because we want the companies to open and to open strong.”

The catastrophic consequences of such policies are fueling sharp tensions within the state apparatus. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, gave an interview to *Time* magazine earlier this week noting that the scale of testing is not

sufficient to reopen.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield warned earlier in the week of a second wave of the pandemic. “There’s a possibility that the assault of the virus on our nation next winter,” he said, “will actually be even more difficult than the one we just went through.”

There are also sharp conflicts between the federal government and the states. The National Governors Association released a statement yesterday warning that “opening prematurely” could “send states back into crisis mode, push health systems past capacity, and force states back into strict social distancing measures. This scenario would repeat the negative economic consequences of pandemic response and reduce public confidence, further deepening a recession and protracting economic recovery.”

The reference to such a scenario “reducing public confidence” points to the fear within the ruling class of social upheaval. The popular opposition to a return to work under unsafe conditions is overwhelming. A CBS poll published yesterday found that 70 percent of the population believes that the country’s top priority should be to “try to slow the spread of coronavirus by keeping people home and social distancing, even if the economy is hurt in the short term.”

The debate within the ruling class, however, is not if a return to work should be engineered, but when and how.

From the beginning, the financial-corporate oligarchy has viewed the coronavirus not as a health care emergency that required the urgent and massive mobilization of resources to save lives, but as an economic, and specifically a market, event. After first downplaying the crisis, the ruling class then engineered a multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street.

Having secured its wealth through the passage, on a bipartisan basis, of the “CARES Act,” the ruling class—supported by the Trump administration, the Democrats, and the media—has worked to shift the narrative to promote a return to work.

To force workers back on the job, the ruling class intends to utilize the threat of economic destitution. The number of workers who have filed for unemployment relief increased by 4.4 million over the past week, to a total of 26 million since the start of the crisis. The economic dislocation far exceeds the official figures, as millions of workers are either not eligible for benefits or have been unable to get through overloaded websites and call centers.

Once production resumes, anyone who refuses to go back to work for fear for their lives will be cut off from unemployment benefits.

Workers must reject the false choice between impoverishment and death. There is much talk about “saving the economy,” but whose economy and in whose interests? The insistence that nonessential production must be resumed at the cost of human life is premised on the assumption that the capitalist system is inviolable, and that the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy will determine the response to the pandemic.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the needs of working people must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth.

All nonessential production must remain closed until the pandemic is under control. To ensure their livelihoods, workers must receive full income and free access to the highest quality health care. Loans must be made available to small businesses. All mortgage, utility, credit card, and student loan payments must be canceled for the duration of the crisis.

The implementation of such measures, essential to prevent a colossal loss of life, is incompatible with the continued domination over society by the corporate and financial oligarchy. The massive wealth hoarded by the ruling elite must be seized. The multitrillion-dollar bailouts of Wall Street and the corporations must be reversed, with these resources instead directed to meet urgent social needs.

The gigantic corporations—including the major manufacturers, Amazon and other logistics industries, and the health care conglomerates—must be transformed into public utilities, run on the basis of social need, not the profits of the rich. The entire financial and banking system must be placed under democratic control.

Only to the extent that workers organize independently and in opposition to the capitalist system can a way out of this crisis in the interests of the working class be found.



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