

As US passes 50,000 deaths, workers strike against back-to-work campaign

Shannon Jones, Andre Damon
25 April 2020

The US death toll from COVID-19 soared past the grim milestone of 50,000 Friday. Despite having just five percent of the world's population, the United States now accounts for one quarter of the world's COVID-19 deaths.

Just one month ago, the total death toll in the United States was under 1,000. Over the past two weeks, an average of approximately 2,000 people have died every day. The US death toll has doubled over ten days.

The number of people killed by the coronavirus, according to official figures, is now greater than the number of combat deaths during the American Revolutionary War, the Vietnam War and the Korean War. Within a matter of days, it will eclipse the number of US deaths in World War I.

There is no indication that the pandemic is contained in the United States. On Friday, the country had the highest number of new cases ever, at 38,000, despite constant claims that the United States is "bending the curve."

Despite the fact that the United States lacks testing, contact tracing, and quarantine systems necessary to combat the spread of the pandemic, governors, with the encouragement of the Trump administration, are recklessly reopening businesses in states throughout the country.

Georgia allowed barbershops, gyms, nail salons and tattoo parlors to reopen yesterday. The state will allow restaurants to open for sit-down service on Monday.

Florida began to reopen its beaches last Friday, and South Carolina began to reopen businesses Monday. Oklahoma permitted some retailers to reopen Friday. Texas and Tennessee have likewise announced they would ease restrictions on business, with Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick declaring there are "more important things than living."

None of these states meet federal guidelines for reopening, which specify two weeks of declines in the

number of positive tests for the disease. But the moves by governors are consistent with a campaign waged by US President Donald Trump for businesses to reopen with a "big bang," irrespective of the degree to which the disease is actually contained.

Workplaces have been a major source of transmission of COVID-19. A Tyson Foods plant in Iowa has sickened hundreds of workers. One hundred more have been sickened at a Tyson plant in Washington, and another hundred at a plant in Georgia.

In the United States, the Detroit-based auto companies have targeted early May to restart production, with Fiat Chrysler and Toyota telling workers to be prepared to report May 4. General Motors has asked workers to report April 27 on a voluntary basis and to prepare to restart production as early as May 4.

With more than 26 million workers made jobless over the course of the past month, companies are using the threat of firing workers, which would make them ineligible for unemployment benefits, to force them back on the line.

"US workers who refuse to return to their jobs because they are worried about catching the coronavirus should not count on getting unemployment benefits," Reuters reported yesterday.

Labor experts noted that denying workers unemployment is a major driver of state-wide back to work orders. "I think that one of the big drivers of this decision by [Georgia governor] Tom Kemp is to get people off unemployment rolls and having the private sector keeping these people afloat," employment lawyer James Radford told Reuters.

The *Wall Street Journal*, which has been in the forefront of demands that lives be sacrificed for the sake of the stock market, has demanded that businesses be indemnified from lawsuits by employees who contract COVID-19 at work.

“Plaintiff firms are also targeting employers if they reopen for business and workers or customers get sick,” the newspaper stated. “The virus can spread easily among workers in confined spaces, and infections have forced some meatpacking plants and food facilities to close... States need to grant them legal protection.”

In response to demands by employers that they return to work under unsafe conditions, workers in the United States and around the world are demanding their rights to a safe workplace.

On Friday, at least 300 workers at 50 Amazon facilities called in sick to protest the lack of safety protections at warehouses. The company has maintained operations throughout the pandemic. In recent weeks, Amazon has fired six workers who have called for better safety protections for workers.

Hundreds of graduate students at Columbia University have gone on strike to demand the suspension of rent and the remission of tuition for all students during the pandemic.

Also on Friday, 130 workers at the St. Monica Center for Rehabilitation & Healthcare nursing home in South Philadelphia voted to strike, demanding an end to the unsafe conditions that have led COVID-19 to ravage the facility.

An FCA worker at the Jefferson North Assembly Plant in Detroit told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I am not opposed to going back to work, but I want to be safe when I go. I have a husband, I have children. I don’t want to bring them anything.

“You will have the tables looking like cell block B in the prison. We are still going to be elbow to elbow. Someone will be coughing in your face.

Referring to the automakers, she added, “They don’t give a damn about killing us. They think, ‘We have paid out enough money for unemployment, it’s time to get them back to work.’”

Aircraft maker Boeing restarted production this week at its US factories in what is being viewed as a test case for the resumption of industrial production. A significant number of Boeing workers boycotted the return to work this week.

Hundreds of people participated in a rolling protest Friday before the Georgia governor’s mansion, with signs including, “Stay home! It’s not time to open!” and “It is too soon to open Georgia!” Over the course of the past week, nurses and other health care workers in Arizona, Virginia and other states confronted far-right demonstrators demanding an unsafe return to work.

These developments are taking place around the world.

Resistance to the restart of nonessential production is continuing in Mexico, with strikes this week by auto parts workers in Ciudad Juarez. This included hundreds of workers at plants operated by Electrical Components International who are demanding to be sent home to quarantine with full pay.

In France, teachers have filed an official strike notice, demanding that the Macron government implement a series of safety measures before the planned reopening of schools in May.

In Britain, National Health Service workers in Leeds are refusing to work shifts after not being provided adequate personal protective equipment on mental health wards. A 46-year-old Leeds mental health nurse, Khulisani Nkala, died from coronavirus last week. One nurse told the *Yorkshire Post* “The government are making out that wearing surgical masks is protective against contracting the virus. It’s not. I might as well just have a tissue over my face.”

From the beginning, the Trump administration, speaking for the financial oligarchy, has had only one concern regarding the COVID-19 pandemic: The preservation and expansion of stock market values and the profit margins of major corporations.

The resistance of workers to the demands by the Trump administration and employers for an unsafe return to work converge with statements from leading scientists and healthcare providers, who have made clear that it is irresponsible to reopen businesses under conditions where the disease is nowhere near contained.

The struggle to defend the lives and livelihoods of workers and the population as a whole is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system and the socialist transformation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact