US government prepares for hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 deaths

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2 May 2020

Friday, May 1 marked a new stage in the social crime being perpetrated against the American people, as President Trump allowed federal guidelines recommending "sheltering in place" during the coronavirus pandemic to expire. Dozens of state governments, with Washington's blessing, have lifted lockdown orders, allowing stores, restaurants and even movie theaters to reopen, and ordering workers to go back to their jobs on pain of having their unemployment benefits cut off.

The loosening of restrictions is being justified with claims that the COVID-19 pandemic is waning and people can now begin to work, shop, dine out, travel and go to church as they once did, without undue risk. But that is not actually the expectation of the Trump administration. On the contrary, press inquiries have found that the federal government expects an enormous spike in the death toll and is making preparations accordingly.

NBC News reports that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) last month "placed orders for well over 100,000 new body bags to hold victims of COVID-19." The Department of Homeland Security, of which FEMA is part, placed a $5.1 million purchase order with a California company.

The report continues: "Around the same time it wrote the contract for the body bags, FEMA opened up bidding to provide about 200 rented refrigerated trailers for locations around the country. The request for proposals specifies a preference for 53-foot trailers, which, at 3,600 cubic feet, are the largest in their class."

FEMA is not the only agency preparing for death on a scale that dwarfs what has already transpired in the past two months. The Veterans Administration, according to multiple reports and documents, paid a supply distributor nearly $300,000 for body bags to be delivered April 30, the last of eight contracts awarded to the same company totaling $12.1 million. Assuming the VA paid a price similar to FEMA's, $12.1 million would buy it nearly 240,000 bags. For the nine million patients seen by the VA in a typical year, that assumes a death rate of about 2.7 percent.

Even these staggering figures could turn out to be gross underestimates of the wave of death that is coming. The Center for Disease Research and Policy in Minnesota projected Thursday that COVID-19 would likely spread in a series of outbreaks over the next year, until 60 to 70 percent of the population is infected. This would drive the death toll into the millions.

NBC News added that an unnamed "senior White House official" had confirmed in an email that the Trump administration is "taking into account the dangers associated with loosening stay-at-home restrictions." The likelihood of a greatly increased death toll was discussed at a meeting April 25 attended by FEMA Director Pete Gaynor; Brett Giroir, a retired admiral who is assistant secretary of health and human services for health; Rear Adm. John Polowczyk, vice director for logistics of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is the supply-chain lead for the coronavirus task force; and staff from the White House National Security Council.

The preponderance of military and security officials is itself an indication that the federal government regards the coronavirus pandemic not primarily as a health crisis, but as a threat to public order, in which the police and military could be called on to play the main role in suppressing public opposition as the lethal consequences of the "back-to-work" campaign demanded by corporate America become evident.

Of the 50 US states, some 23, with a combined population of about 115 million people, will have lifted most coronavirus restrictions by Monday. Another eight states, with a combined population of 53 million, have announced plans to follow suit by mid-May.

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While this will leave 19 states with 161 million people still under some form of lockdown, the stay-at-home orders have many loopholes—witness Boeing calling 27,000 workers back to their jobs in the Seattle, Washington area despite state restrictions, and plans to reopen auto plants in Michigan.

Whatever protection the lockdowns provided is being steadily eroded as Democratic and Republican governors kowtow to the demands of giant corporations—backed by fascistic displays like the armed right-wingers in the Michigan state Capitol Thursday—that factories and other workplaces be reopened. The end of restrictions in 31 states will accelerate the penetration of the virus into rural areas only lightly touched so far, as well as providing a new source of infection for those parts of the country where the worst impact of the pandemic was thought to have passed.

Statements from both federal and state governments reveal the class character of the drive to "reopen the economy" and restart the engine of capitalism—the extraction of profit from the labor of workers.

After reporting Thursday another mammoth increase in claims for unemployment compensation—3.84 million, bringing the six-week total to more than 30 million—the US Department of Labor warned that when factories and workplaces reopen, workers must go back to work or be cut off benefits, regardless of health concerns.

"Barring unusual circumstances," the agency said, "a request that a furloughed employee return to his or her job very likely constitutes an offer of suitable employment that the employee must accept."

State governments were even blunter. The Texas Workforce Commission said that to be eligible for unemployment benefits, workers must be "willing and able to work all the days and hours required for the type of work you are seeking."

Texas experienced its worst day of the pandemic, with 50 deaths and 1,000 new infections on April 30, the day before Governor Greg Abbott's order to reopen the state took effect. Abbott rescinded broader lockdowns set by local officials in Houston, San Antonio, Austin and Dallas, which currently have the bulk of Texas coronavirus cases.

In Missouri, Governor Mike Parsons said, "When we open the state up, if you've got to go back to work, if your boss calls and says you have to go back to work, you have to go back to work."

Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds said, "If you're an employer and you offer to bring your employee back to work and they decide not to, that's a voluntary quit… Therefore, they would not be eligible for the unemployment money." Meanwhile, in Sioux City, Iowa, which had only 158 cases of coronavirus as of April 23, the total jumped six-fold in a week, to 851, largely because of outbreaks among workers at local meatpacking plants.

The meatpacking industry provides some of the most horrific indications of what is to come as millions of workers now on layoff are forced back to work under threat of losing unemployment compensation and the ability to pay rent and feed their families.

At a Tyson Foods slaughterhouse in Wallula, Washington, the largest in that state, 15 percent of workers tested positive for coronavirus after one died. At another Tyson plant in Logansport, Indiana, the virus has infected 890 of 2,200 workers.

But on Monday, Trump ordered meatpacking plants that had closed to be reopened, while suggesting that the employers needed "liability protections" against likely claims by workers infected on the job. One columnist observed acidly, "If you work in a meatpacking plant, by order of President Trump, you are officially considered less essential than the steak you're cutting up."

Through the back-to-work campaign, the capitalist ruling elite aims to impose the burden of the coronavirus pandemic, both economically and in terms of suffering and death, on the working class. It seeks the normalization of death, the acceptance that infection and mass death are simply part of life—at least for working people. Hence the ongoing efforts to downplay or cover up the death toll, to create a manufactured popular movement against lockdowns, and to establish a legal basis for denying unemployment and other benefits so as to starve workers back to their jobs.

The Democrats and Republicans have only tactical differences over the methods to be employed, while they agree on the basic goal, because they are capitalist parties determined to defend the capitalist system. The working class can defend its social rights, including the right to life itself, only by a resolute break with the entire capitalist political structure and the building of a mass political movement for socialism.

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