

Trump White House steps up return to work drive

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President Donald Trump's virtual town hall meeting last night marked a new stage in his administration's drive to force the American population back to work amidst the spreading coronavirus pandemic. That it was held at the Lincoln Memorial, which honors the fight for equality which the 16th president embodied, gave the event an even more politically obscene character.

The primary purpose of the event, titled "America Together: Returning to Work" and moderated by Fox News anchors Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum, was to justify forcing workers back to work without any real protection against the deadly virus. It was held after a weekend of meetings at Camp David with Trump's top advisors, reportedly including Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow and press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, to map out the administration's pivot from the public health disaster to the resumption of corporate profit-making.

While announcing no measures to combat the pandemic, which continues to spread across the country, Trump opened by claiming, "I think we'll have a vaccine by the end of the year," implying that it was now safe for people to be exposed to the virus. Neither Trump nor the moderators made any mention of the warnings by medical experts internationally that a vaccine would likely take at least 18 months to develop.

He then proceeded to demand that schools, colleges and universities reopen by September, and boasted of his executive order to keep meat packing plants open even as the pandemic infects and kills large numbers of workers. When asked about employees worried about getting infected, he said, "The employees have to want to work. If they don't want to work, that's one thing. But they are working and they need the money."

Trump tied any possibility of federal support to states and municipalities facing economic collapse to a payroll tax cut, calling it "essential" to any piece of legislation he

would sign. A payroll tax cut would simultaneously provide a further windfall to corporations and the rich and slash revenues that support Social Security and Medicare. The gutting of these core social programs has long been a goal of the financial oligarchy and the Republican right.

There was no suggestion by the president, the moderators or the video-taped and carefully vetted questioners that social distancing measures should be kept in place and non-essential businesses remain closed until the disease was contained.

The continued rise in confirmed coronavirus cases across the country, however, underscores the fact that there is no scientific or medical basis for Trump's drive to force people back to work. The number of new cases in states, including Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas and Wyoming, is trending upwards even as they are reopening, while the number of new cases in Alabama, Florida, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia has stayed relatively constant.

No state has seen a consistent reduction in the number of new COVID-19 cases over the past 14 days, ostensibly the criterion to reopen under Trump's official guidelines.

Just as the number of cases has continued to rise in the United States, currently standing at just under 1.2 million, the number of deaths has also continued to climb, currently at more than 68,500. This includes more than 3,000 over the weekend. Internationally, there are more than 3.5 million officially confirmed cases and nearly 250,000 recorded deaths.

These figures are why Dr. Mike Ryan of the World Health Organization (WHO) on Friday insisted that to safely loosen social distancing measures and reopen businesses, there had to be in place the capacity for comprehensive testing, contact-tracing and quarantining, something that exists nowhere in the United States. Ryan

also said that exiting from “public health and social measures... requires a very careful, well-planned process that’s based on, number one, understanding the exact epidemiology of the disease in your country or at subnational level; so do you understand the problem, do you understand where the virus is?”

This is the basic question that is still largely unknown across the world and especially in the United States. One fact rarely mentioned by the media is that as testing has been expanded, the percentage of positive cases to the number of tests has stayed constant. This indicates both that the pandemic is still spreading and that the current level of testing does not capture the full extent of the pandemic in the country.

This has not stopped every section of the American political and media establishment from supporting the reopening drive. The *Wall Street Journal* on Friday published an editorial titled, “Testing Isn’t Everything,” with the tag line, “It won’t banish the coronavirus, and it’s not an excuse for not reopening,” directly contradicting the advice the WHO has been giving for months.

The Democratic-aligned *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos, published an editorial on Sunday under the headline, “Managing the reopening.”

At a recent news conference, Colorado Governor Jared Polis, a Democrat, lashed out at a reporter who asked whether or not the state had enough testing to reopen. He retorted, “You’re still obsessed with testing.” He then demanded that people focus on “the need to wear masks, the social distancing and protecting our most vulnerable,” in order to cover up the fact that the pandemic is still spreading in the state.

The position of the Trump administration itself was spelled out very explicitly by the president’s son-in-law Jared Kushner last Wednesday, when he asserted on Fox that, “We’re on the other side of the medical aspect of this and I think we’ve achieved all the different milestones that are needed. So the federal government rose to the challenge, and this is a great success story and I think that that’s really what needs to be told.”

What success story? Yesterday, in a discussion with Fox’s Chris Wallace, White House Coronavirus Task Force Response Coordinator Deborah Birx backtracked from the administration’s previous statement that there would only be 60,000 fatalities from the pandemic, claiming that “our projections have always been between 100,000 and 240,000 American lives lost.” She added that the estimate applies only “with full mitigation.”

Neither Birx nor Wallace batted an eye at the staggering figure, which is more than the number of American deaths in World War I and about half those in World War II. And, as Birx openly admits, this projection holds only if physical distancing is maintained.

The policies being advocated by Birx, Polis, Kushner and Trump amount to developing some form of “herd immunity.” By not testing and contact-tracing to know where the virus is, while simultaneously ordering everyone back into the factories, offices and workplaces, they are setting up the majority of the population to be exposed to the deadly contagion.

Even under the most optimistic scenarios, millions will likely die. The most conservative estimates of the infectiousness of the virus state that half of the population will need to become infected and successfully fight off the virus before it will be unable to spread. At a death rate of just 1 percent, about 1.65 million people would die, double the number of soldiers killed in the Civil War.

This at the same time assumes that everyone gets adequate health care. While the medical infrastructure in the most hard-hit places in the US—New York and New Jersey—has not yet totally collapsed, it no doubt would if the number of cases suddenly increased two-, five- or ten-fold. At that point, data from Italy and Wuhan suggests that up to five percent of people die because there are not enough ventilators and other critical supplies to go around. In this scenario, 8.25 million would die.

Moreover, whether or not a recovered patient remains immune to the coronavirus is still an open question. Immunity from the SARS pandemic in 2002–2004 lasted on average two years, which means the only reason that virus did not become seasonal is that it was contained. There is concern among epidemiologists that the current coronavirus pandemic will become seasonal, and because there is no immunity or vaccine, it will kill some percentage of the population every year.



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