

Coronavirus pandemic ravages rural areas in US and internationally

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The spread of coronavirus cases and deaths into rural areas across the United States and internationally lays bare the lie that the response by the Trump administration and other governments is a “success story” and the “war” against the pandemic is being won.

There are more than 3.8 million confirmed coronavirus cases internationally and 264,000 deaths. So far, less than 1.3 million have recovered, meaning that more than 2.2 million lives across the planet still hang in the balance. Moreover, there has been a sharp increase in the number of new cases in Russia, Brazil and India, which are on their way to becoming new epicenters of COVID-19.

Even in countries where the official total of new cases has been decreasing in densely packed urban areas thanks to physical distancing measures, such as the United States, the case counts and death tolls in rural areas have begun to increase. In fact, if the cases in New York City are not counted, the number of new cases in the US overall is still increasing.

It is well known that the official figures for both infections and deaths vastly underestimate the actual toll of the virus, in part because in most countries testing remains wholly inadequate.

The criminality of the policies being pursued in country after country was further exposed by a report published Tuesday on the preprint server bioRxiv, which documents a mutated strain of the coronavirus, one that started in Europe and is much more infectious than the original strain that emerged in Wuhan, China.

Not only are mutations potentially more infectious and/or deadly, the strain of the virus may be sufficiently different to require a different vaccine. This is why a new flu vaccine is developed each year, because new strains of the virus are always evolving.

Such a situation in the case of the coronavirus would be an order of magnitude more severe. Not only is there not a working vaccine or known therapeutic, there is no natural

immunity to the disease among the world’s population, meaning that a second strain is a potential second infection. As such, the policy implicitly being put forward by sending workers back to offices and factories—that of “herd immunity”—becomes even more homicidal in its implications for the vast majority of the world’s people.

There is very little known about the virus from an epidemiological standpoint. The World Health Organization has warned that it is unclear if surviving the virus provides meaningful immunity in the first place. And a variety of medical reports have been produced showing that even those who do recover from the pandemic are often beset with lung, heart, liver or brain problems that can last decades. Age has proven to be no defense. Even infants have died from the coronavirus, and adults in their 30s are suffering strokes after being infected.

In recent weeks, a mysterious new COVID-related syndrome has emerged among children on Long Island, in New York City and in other hot spots around the US. According to the *New York Times*, at least 50 children on Long Island and in the city have been treated for the disease, which doctors are calling pediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome. The illness involves inflammation of the blood vessels and has caused a number of its child victims to become critically ill and be placed into intensive care units.

According to the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, some of the areas now being hit the hardest in the US are among the most isolated in the country. One of the worst-hit areas is Hall County, Nebraska, with a population of 58,600. It has 1,284 cases and 28 deaths, giving it a per capita case count that rivals New York City. It also is one of the least prepared for a pandemic. According to *StatNews*, it has less than 30 critical staff within a 40-minute drive of residents and has less than 650 hospital beds for all medical care, not just

coronavirus cases.

Nationally, 130 rural hospitals have shut down since 2010, and more than 450 are at risk of closing because of the pandemic. According to the Chartis Center for Rural Health, rural hospitals have lost between 50 and 80 percent of their income because outpatient services have largely been canceled in an effort to prevent hospitals from becoming transmission vectors for the disease.

Many of these outbreaks are centered around workplaces that are deemed “essential” for the US economy. Cass County, Indiana, which hosts a major Tyson meatpacking plant, has 1,406 coronavirus cases and an infection rate 10 times the national average. Ford County, Kansas has 869 coronavirus cases, many of which are connected to the Cargill and National Beef plants in the area.

These regions are accounting for an increasingly large fraction of the total US death toll, which has grown to nearly 75,000 in two months. They are facing only the beginnings of their outbreaks. Even the more optimistic models of the pandemic project that many rural areas will not hit their peak number of cases until late August. Yet most rural states have already begun opening up, underscoring the dangers of the back-to-work orders being imposed on their respective populations.

Similar situations exist in rural communities around the world. In Valderrobres, Spain, a town of only 2,400, half of the health care workers at the local nursing home and 50 out of 60 of its residents contracted the coronavirus. Twelve have so far died. The country as a whole has suffered 253,682 cases and 25,857 deaths.

India’s rural population has been particularly hard hit. An estimated 120 million people travel to cities on a regular basis for work, often dozens or hundreds of miles, to take care of their families and communities in the more remote areas of the country. Virtually all of them were stranded on March 24 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered a hasty nationwide lockdown.

As a result, this section of the population began to travel home, most of whom simply started walking. Without any protection from the pandemic, many have succumbed to the disease and many more have become carriers, bringing the contagion to the nonurban parts of the country. The official case count stands at 52,987 with 1,785 deaths, and the country’s rate of new cases and deaths is one of the highest in the world, even as thousands of factories are being reopened.

The pandemic has reached even the most isolated parts of the world’s population. A fifteen-year-old Yanomami

boy from the Amazonian village of Rehebe, in Brazil recently died. Rehebe is on the Uraricoera River, which snakes through the mountains and rainforests of southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. Venezuela has 367 cases and 10 deaths, while Brazil has 123,089 cases and 8,412 deaths. It currently has the third most new coronavirus cases and new deaths in the world.

These figures are only precursors to the death tolls that are to come. There is no evidence that the coronavirus pandemic has been contained, despite claims to that effect from virtually every government. Yet it is now being fueled by the world’s ruling elites in their frenzied drive to reopen the economy. They are aware that without a vaccine or a system of testing and contact tracing, they are condemning additional millions to suffer infection and possibly die.

In the midst of this human tragedy—including unemployment, poverty and hunger on a scale not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s—stock markets around the world continue to rise, fueled by the trillions upon trillions of public funds being injected into the markets by governments and central banks on behalf of the corporate-financial oligarchy.

Masses of workers and oppressed people are becoming increasingly aware that their most fundamental interests, including life itself, are incompatible with the existing economic and political system, based on the accumulation of private profit. A global upheaval is coming. The struggle against the coronavirus pandemic is a struggle against the capitalism system. The most critical question is the construction of a new political leadership in the working class to imbue this movement with an understanding of its revolutionary and socialist tasks.



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