

White House Coronavirus Task Force member warns of “really serious” consequences of premature reopening

Bryan Dyne
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Anthony Fauci and other members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force testified yesterday before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee.

In his testimony, Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stated that “the consequences could be really serious” if states and counties continue to reopen prematurely amidst the spreading coronavirus pandemic. Fauci also repeated what he told the *New York Times* the day before: that there will be “needless suffering and death” if states open up before they are able to contain the virus.

In answers to questions, Fauci stated that the pandemic is not “under control,” acknowledged that the US was undercounting the death toll and noted that immunity to the pandemic has not been demonstrated. He likewise poured cold water on the idea that a breakthrough therapeutic treatment or vaccine is just around the corner.

The event had something of a surreal character to it, as the facts recounted by Fauci stood as a clear condemnation of the policies of the administration of which he is a part. Trump is aggressively pushing a back-to-work campaign that is already producing a spike in new cases and deaths. Fauci chose his words carefully, limiting himself to suggesting the need for more testing from an administration that has a record of abject failure in that regard.

The hearing was held on the same day that the number of cases in the United States rose above 1.4 million and the tally of the dead surged past 83,000. The number of cases and deaths internationally stand at 4.3 million and 292,000, respectively.

On Wednesday, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington projected that 147,000 people in the US will die from

COVID-19 by August. The IHME, which has been criticized by epidemiologists for underestimating the danger, increased its forecast because of “changes in mobility and social distancing policies.”

More than 40 states, under both Democratic and Republican governors, have now loosened lockdown restrictions that were put in place in attempt to stem outbreaks of the disease. As a result, nearly half have already seen an increase of new coronavirus cases.

This reality did not stop the chairman of the committee, Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), from beginning the hearing by making it clear that people should be expecting to “go back to school and back to work.”

The main witnesses for the hearing included Fauci, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Robert Redfield; Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Stephen Hahn; and Assistant Secretary for Health Brett Giroir. Deborah Birx, the ostensible leader of the task force, was absent.

Alexander’s first question demanded to know how to send the country’s estimated 20 million college students and 50 million primary and secondary students back to school as part of a plan “to persuade parents... to return to work in August.” Alexander suggested, “Let’s start with treatments and vaccines.”

Fauci responded by noting that it is “a bridge too far” to expect either a vaccine or effective treatment by the start of the school year. “We don’t see a vaccine playing in the ability of individuals to get back to school this term,” he said. At the same time, he walked back his previous promotion of the drug Remdesivir, calling the drug’s effect on recovery time “really modest.”

Democrats took the hearing as an opportunity to make hypocritical criticisms of the policy of the Trump administration, tailored to future campaign commercials,

while avoiding any real discussion of what is happening in the United States. In particular, no one mentioned the multitrillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street, supported unanimously in the Senate. All of the senators participating in the hearing voted for the bill, which has been followed by demands from the ruling class for a rapid return to work.

Senator Elizabeth Warren asked, “Do we have enough robust countermeasures in place that we don’t have to worry about a bad fall and winter?”

“The projection,” Fauci responded, “is that by the time we get to the end of the summer and early fall, we will have [enough testing] in place,” he said. Warren followed up, asking what happens “If we don’t do better on testing, on contact tracing, and on social distancing. Will deaths from coronavirus necessarily increase?” Fauci provided the obvious answer: “If you do not do an adequate response, we will have the deleterious consequence of more infections and more deaths.”

In fact, the state of testing and contact testing, which the World Health Organization insisted since January is the backbone of any plan to contain the virus, is woefully inadequate, and deliberately so. In his remarks, Giroir attempted to hide this state of affairs by focusing on the fact that there have now been nearly 10 million tests conducted in the country.

What he did not mention is that the US is 40th in terms of testing per capita, and that the tests for the coronavirus that have been conducted are still not sufficient to capture the full extent of the virus. Moreover, while the CDC has approximately 10,000 people who are trained to trace the contacts of those infected, public health experts have estimated that the agency needs 10 times that number to effectively find individuals who may have been exposed to the virus.

None of these points were raised by any of the Democrats on the committee, who followed the lead of Alexander after he spoke against “finger pointing.” At most, ranking member Patty Murray (Democrat of Washington state) said, “We need dramatically more testing. It is unacceptable we still don’t have a national strategic plan to make sure testing is free, fast and everywhere.”

Nor did Democrats press the issue of why mass testing began only in late March, not in early February when the pandemic was first spreading across the globe. No mention was made of the complete failure of the initial CDC testing kits, and only passing reference was made to ongoing deadly outbreaks in auto factories, Amazon

warehouses, meatpacking plants and nursing homes.

Senator Bernie Sanders merely asked whether the United States was undercounting deaths. Fauci responded that “the number of deaths are likely higher” than the official death toll, because “there may have been people who died at home” who were not counted “because they never got to the hospital.”

The most inflammatory comments came from Senator Rand Paul (Republican of Kentucky), who claimed that “In rural states we never really reached any sort of pandemic levels, in Kentucky and other states... outside of New England, we’ve had a relatively benign course for this virus nationwide.”

Presumably Paul is including New York as part of New England, while he hails the “benign” nature of the coronavirus in Michigan (4,674 deaths), Illinois (3,601 deaths), California (2,876 deaths) and Louisiana (2,347 deaths).

Nor did Paul take note of the surge of new cases by at least 72 percent in 10 areas across the country over the past week. This includes Central City in his state of Kentucky, which saw a 650 percent increase in new cases.

Paul also continued the lie that the coronavirus is no worse than the flu. He demanded that schools be allowed to reopen “district by district,” asserting that children are more immune to the virus. Not only is immunity for any age group against the virus still in question, three young children have died from a complication of the coronavirus currently known as “pediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome.”

Paul expressed nakedly the actual policy of the corporate-financial oligarchy in the United States, spearheaded by the Trump administration. After handing itself trillions of dollars, the ruling class is demanding that workers place their lives and the lives of their family members and coworkers at extreme risk by going back to work to produce profits.



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