

COVID-19 cases surging again in Japan

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COVID-19 cases have spiked in Japan in recent weeks, particularly in the densely-populated capital of Tokyo, demonstrating the danger the pandemic continues to pose. Last Saturday's national one-day tally of 659 cases was the fourth highest since the pandemic began, with similarly high totals in April when the government declared a state of emergency.

On July 15, Tokyo raised its city alert system to level four, the highest. The next two days each set new record highs for the city with 286 and 293 cases respectively. As of Monday, that number had fallen to 168. However, the average number of untraceable cases has doubled, potentially leading to an explosion in life-threatening illnesses. Furthermore, given the government's reporting time, the number of cases announced daily is on a three-day delay, meaning the public does not have up-to-date information.

Despite the fact that the pandemic has been intensifying around the world, the government has taken no steps to safeguard against a surge. Yoshihiro Yamaguchi, the head of the Trauma and Critical Care Center at Kyorin University Hospital, drew attention to the danger Tokyo faces during a meeting with local officials on July 15. "The pace of increase in the number of new COVID-19 cases has exceeded the pace of securing empty beds to take in patients," he warned. "The current strategy needs to be changed. Otherwise the (health care system) will collapse."

There are inadequate facilities for quarantining patients with mild symptoms, forcing hundreds, just within Tokyo, to self-isolate at home. If their symptoms worsen they will have no immediate access to medical care. Yet, the shortfall is not new. In April, as the pandemic developed, hospitals were already at or beyond capacity, forcing sick individuals to travel around the city looking for a medical facility that would admit them.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government has attempted to artificially deflate the number of cases in order to prevent the outbreak from negatively impacting the economy. This

underscores the criminality of his administration's approach to the deadly virus.

Japan ranks staggeringly low for conducted tests compared to other nations, carrying out only 5,060 tests per million people, or just half of one percent of the population. By contrast, many countries in Europe have carried out tens of thousands tests per million people.

Japan's official death rate of just over 1,000 is also artificially low. Numbers released in June for Tokyo found there were more than 1,000 "excess deaths" in April alone, a 12 percent increase over the annual average. Whether these people died directly from COVID-19 and were not tested or were unable to access medical care for other illnesses in an overwhelmed healthcare system, their deaths are the result of the refusal by the central and local governments to take the required measures to address the needs of the broader population.

Instead, the central government has used the pandemic to force through a new state of emergency law, supported by the opposition Democrats in parliament, that will ultimately be directed at attacking the democratic rights of the working class.

Abe's government also approved two record corporate handouts that total 234 trillion yen (\$US2.2 trillion) to shield the wealthiest layers from the impact of the economic downturn. Another bailout package is being planned for the fall. However, only paltry amounts were made available for workers, including a one-off 100,000 yen (\$931) payment for Japanese residents.

The fact that Abe now refuses to declare a new state of emergency despite similar, if not worse, conditions than in April, shows that the new law has nothing to do with public safety. The main concern for the government, now that the emergency law has been passed and corporate bailouts distributed, is to keep workplaces open, people on the job, and schools open so that big business can continue to extract surplus value from the working class.

Underscoring its big business priorities, the government is promoting a "Go to Travel" campaign, providing subsidies and financial incentives to people to travel

throughout the country. This is an attempt to boost local economies and convince people that conditions have returned to normal. With the surge of cases in Tokyo, the campaign now excludes the capital, but the risk of spreading the virus elsewhere is high.

The pandemic continues to have a serious impact on the working class. Despite the bailouts, 55 percent of companies surveyed last month said they had either slashed wages or laid off workers. Hisashi Yamada, an economist at the Japan Research Institute, stated in June: “The jobless rate will remain on the uptrend as more and more firms will become unable to weather the economic pain.”

Officially, Japan’s unemployment remains relatively low, but it has grown to 2.9 percent in May, up from 2.5 percent in March. When taking into account workers who have been furloughed, the actual unemployment rate is more than 11.5 percent. Those most affected are part-time and contract workers who lack job protections and make up 36 percent of the total workforce.

The attack on workers includes those dealing directly with the pandemic. Last month, nurses at the Tokyo Women’s Medical University Hospital were told they would receive pay cuts as well as nonpayment of summer bonuses. Nearly 400 nurses, or 20 percent of the staff, are now threatening to quit in response. The Japan Federation of Medical Workers Unions is doing nothing to defend its members aside from asking the hospital’s board of directors to reconsider its decision.

The union is part of the National Confederation of Trade Unions (Zenroren), which is allied with the Japanese Communist Party, a degenerated Stalinist party that is part of the political establishment. Around 30 percent of medical institutions around the country are planning on cutting wages to nurses this summer, according to the union.



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