

Dr. Michael Osterholm, named to the Biden coronavirus taskforce, calls for a national lockdown

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“There is no trade-off between health and the economy. Both require aggressively getting control of the virus. History will judge us harshly if we miss this life- and economy-saving opportunity to get it right this time.” Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center of Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, and recently appointed member of the coronavirus task force for President-elect Joe Biden.

If current projections hold for the United States, another 160,000 people will needlessly perish due to COVID-19 infections by February 1, 2021, a period less than three months from today and just over one year into the country’s foray with the pandemic. This would bring the total number of deaths to a staggering 400,000, and even that horrific total is a conservative estimate since excess deaths are not counted.

On Tuesday, the US saw a single-day high of 142,212 new cases of COVID-19 infections, bringing the cumulative total of 10.65 million. The present acceleration in cases is quite extreme. The current seven-day average reached 124,556 infections per day, up from 92,856 cases per day just a week ago, a 34 percent increase.

Daily fatalities had a one-day jump to 1,465. The seven-day moving average for deaths has also exceeded the threshold of 1,000 per day.

If President-elect Joseph Biden were serious in responding to the health crisis that grows more ominous with each passing day, then a lockdown has become a critical measure to bring the pandemic under control. Repeatedly, throughout the epidemic, public health officials have warned that if health systems become overwhelmed, an even greater health catastrophe will ensue.

Yesterday, every major news media marked the single-day high in hospitalizations, which neared 62,000 and climbing rapidly. This represents a 40 percent jump in just two weeks. There are almost 12,000 patients in the ICU and 3,200 on ventilators. Testing center capacity is being overwhelmed, and testing delays are once again commonplace.

Seventeen states have reported record-breaking numbers of

hospitalizations. North Dakota is at 100 percent of its capacity. Stunningly, the state’s governor, Doug Burgum, announced Tuesday that due to a significant shortage in health care staffing, he would allow health care workers who have COVID-19 but are asymptomatic to continue working and caring for patients.

The Mayo Clinic Health System issued a statement warning that hospitals in northwest Wisconsin have reached 100 percent capacity. There are no available beds at hospitals that serve patients in Barron, Bloomer, Eau Claire, Osseo, and Menomonie. Fifty percent of the patients in their ICU have COVID. Forty percent of the medical/surgical beds are filled with COVID patients. More than 300 health care workers are facing restrictions because they have been infected or been exposed.

A joint statement by officials from the Mayo Clinic declared, “We are pleading for everyone’s help to wear a mask and follow all public health guidelines to limit the spread of this disease.” Department of Health Services chief medical officer Ryan Watergaard warned that Wisconsin is “at a tipping point” when health facilities may have to ration care.

Hospitals in Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, and Montana are also reporting being at or near capacity. Last weekend, Utah’s Governor Gary Herbert declared a state of emergency for hospital overcrowding stating the “situation is dire and unsustainable.” The situation is so grim in El Paso County, Texas, that there has been a request for four more freezers, bringing the total to ten morgue trucks. The order issued by Judge (county executive) Ricardo Samaniego to shut down nonessential services expires today.

Despite Biden’s promise to do “everything possible to get COVID-19 under control,” acknowledging that the present surge is “the worst wave yet in this pandemic,” he has sidestepped the issue of a lockdown to appease Wall Street, which monitors his every word.

After telling ABC News anchor David Muir he “would shut it down; I would listen to the scientists,” he walked his statement back, responding, “I got asked by David Muir a question, if I was asked to shut everything down. I took that as a generic

question if—am I going to follow the science?” In a town hall meeting in Philadelphia, Biden made his position even more apparent, “I don’t think there’s a need to lock down ... I laid out a plan [on] how you can open businesses.”

Biden’s pandemic response appears not so dissimilar to that of the Trump administration. Outside of rejoining the World Health Organization, his call for more testing, more PPE, mask mandates, investment in vaccines and treatments, and more testing and contact tracing capacity will do little more to address a raging pandemic out of control with health systems under massive strains.

The Biden administration is touting its coronavirus taskforce as highly experienced and committed to the pandemic’s science. It would be revealing to hear what Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center of Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota and recently appointed task force member said on the MSNBC program “Morning Joe.”

In the first week of August, Neel Kashkari, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and I, we wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* that basically said we need, in a sense, lockdown to drive this infection level to a place where we can actually control it with testing and tracing and follow up that way just like the Asian countries have done. I’m talking about everything from Australia to New Zealand all the way right up through China and Japan. All those countries have done it already.

What it would take, however, is to really to deal with the pain and suffering economically. What we basically proposed was because the saving rate in this country has gone through the roof since the pandemic—we’ve gone from 8 percent to over 22 percent—we could borrow the money from ourselves at a historically low-interest rate, we can pay people to lose their jobs, we can pay small businesses, we can take care of the city, state, and county governments, if we just elected to do that.

If Washington could get together and make that happen, that would be a very different kind of lockdown where people wouldn’t suffer, and we could get this virus under control ... if we are a raging house on fire with the coronavirus in this country our economy is not going to do well. So, we have to understand we have a way to do it, but we have elected not to do it.

We would argue with Dr. Osterholm that the massive profits made by corporations during the pandemic on the backs of workers who have become infected in millions and dying in hundreds of thousands should pay for the lockdowns.

Still, Dr. Osterholm’s perspective is clear on what is

required, as he has been making the argument that the lockdowns in the spring were lifted far too soon to be effective. His position stands in stark contrast to Biden’s complete lack of commitment to these necessary measures. After all, Biden is a capitalist politician for whom the concerns raised by the representatives of the financial markets are the top consideration.

Osterholm, by contrast, is a distinguished world-renowned epidemiologist who has been active in the field for over 40 years. Besides serving as chief of the Acute Disease Epidemiology section for the Minnesota Department of Health, he has been a special adviser to the Department of Health and Human Services on issues related to bioterrorism and public health preparedness and served on the CDC’s National Center for Infectious Disease Board of Scientific Counselors. He has been an international leader on influenza pandemic preparedness and has provided numerous commentaries and opinions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notably, in his August op-ed piece, Dr. Osterholm made it clear that though he supports mask-wearing, mask mandates, which are in place in some form within 49 of 50 states (Nebraska has no requirement), will not be enough to control the pandemic. He added that to gain control over the epidemic, community transmission rates need to be reduced below one per 100,000 per day, and public health infrastructure is rapidly developed. Presently the infection rate in the US exceeds 36 per 100,000 per day.

With a viable vaccine soon available for production and distribution, it becomes imperative to avoid further loss of life. The working class must call for a lockdown (including school closures) with assured paychecks to bring this pandemic under control and emerge safely from its grip.

The Democratic Party, beholden to Wall Street and corporate America, is content to advance the belief that it has been solely the Trump administration’s handling of the pandemic that has created this disaster, although Democratic governors and the bipartisan Congress have been thoroughly complicit with the measures taken to date. Biden’s refusal to demand a lockdown based on advice from his own scientific advisers continues this pattern.



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