

As US COVID-19 cases top 11 million, Biden aides reject new lockdown to save lives

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The United States passed 11 million coronavirus cases Sunday, according to the most widely used tracker, from Johns Hopkins University. The grim milestone came amid warnings from public health authorities that the death toll, now nearing 250,000, could hit half a million by the spring.

In state after state, governors have been compelled to issue emergency orders for the partial or complete shutdown of bars, restaurants, gyms and other facilities where people congregate. Michigan shut down all high school sports for three weeks and issued the strongest warnings against large gatherings over the Thanksgiving holiday.

One sphere, however, was entirely exempt from such restrictions: major corporate workplaces, including factories, warehouses and office buildings, where hundreds or thousands of workers are crammed together in defiance of social distancing and other public health considerations.

The scale of the pandemic is far greater than it was last spring. According to Johns Hopkins, 45 states showed week-to-week increases in the number of infections, in contrast to the handful of states worst hit in March and April and the band of states across the South and Southwest that were the focal point during the summer. Every region of the country is affected, although the worst-hit states are now in the northern plains and upper Midwest—the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois, as well as Michigan.

The most dangerous aspect of the new upsurge is the strain being placed on health care facilities. According to the COVID Tracking Project, there were a record 69,455 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 on Saturday, with the figure expected to hit 70,000 within days.

In many areas, some urban, some rural, every available hospital bed has been filled with a coronavirus patient. As cases mount, necessary facilities will become unavailable and patients will begin dying in hallways, in emergency rooms, in ambulances and in their homes.

All these strains will be compounded by the onset of the annual influenza season, which caused about 400,000 hospitalizations and 22,000 deaths last year.

The response of the Trump administration to the pandemic

has been one of willful neglect, now openly proclaimed as the program of “herd immunity,” allowing the infection to run wild through the population while rejecting any public health measures that would impact corporate profits.

Trump himself has not attended a meeting of his White House Coronavirus Task Force in five months, Admiral Brett Giroir, a member of the task force, confirmed in a television interview Sunday. That indifference and callousness is the most important single reason for Trump’s defeat in the November 3 presidential election by Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

But Biden is no more willing to impose burdens on corporate America than Trump. The members of his coronavirus task force, established last week, have made it clear that Biden rejects a lockdown of the economy, the only action that would prevent a winter of devastating death and illness while work on the development, production and distribution of a vaccine continued.

This posture is especially criminal given the enormous progress being made in vaccine development, beginning with Pfizer’s announcement that its vaccine has proven 90 percent effective in third-stage trials involving 40,000 volunteers. Any COVID-19 deaths that take place during the months between development of the vaccine and its widespread distribution are the sole responsibility of those public officials and corporate bosses who are forcing millions to go to work despite the evidence that large workplaces are central points of infection in the pandemic.

The Biden aides who appeared on the television talk shows Sunday gave uniform, consistent answers about coronavirus policy, clearly coordinated with the candidate: there will be no new lockdown; those who become infected bear responsibility for failing to wear masks, socially distance, and wash their hands; no new resources to pay for coronavirus-related economic dislocation will be available unless there is bipartisan congressional support; there is nothing Biden can do about the pandemic until he becomes president on January 20, 2021.

Even that is open to question as Trump refuses to concede

and continues plotting to nullify the election results.

Former surgeon general Vivek Murthy, co-chair of the Biden coronavirus task force, appeared on “Fox News Sunday” and also gave an interview to National Public Radio. In both, he blamed the population, not the corporations and government, for the resurgence of COVID-19, citing what he called “pandemic fatigue.”

“People are letting down their guard in terms of social gatherings,” he said, citing dinner parties and other small-scale events. He said nothing about factories and warehouses where hundreds or thousands work side-by-side with barely a pretense of social distancing.

He called for a focus on “expanding testing capacity and our contact tracing force.” That is all well and good, but these measures do not prevent the spread of the virus, they only detect it.

He called for “evidence-based guidance for schools, businesses, and faith organizations,” language that presumes that schools and workplaces will stay open, and churches will hold services, regardless of a deadly pandemic.

When his Fox interviewer pressed him on Biden’s attitude to a lockdown, Murthy replied, “This is a measure of last resort,” adding, “If we just lock down, we’re going to exacerbate pandemic fatigue. We need to approach this with a scalpel rather than with the blunt force of an axe.”

Dr. Atul Gawande, another member of the Biden task force, appeared on ABC’s “This Week” program. He was asked directly about the possibility of a lockdown and he responded bluntly, “We are not in support of a nationwide lockdown and believe there is not a scenario unless—there simply isn’t a scenario because we can get this under control.”

He went on to call for “targeted measures building on mask-wearing to include widespread testing, to include dialing up and down capacity restrictions, and those measures need to happen on a more localized basis.”

Another task force member, Dr. Michael Osterholm, appeared on NBC News’ “Meet the Press.” He forthrightly warned that in the interval between the development of a vaccine and its widespread distribution, a matter of months, “we are in a very dangerous period, the most dangerous public health period since 1918,” when a global influenza pandemic killed 50 million people worldwide.

Vaccines would provide the fundamental change, he said, but until they were widely available it was necessary to do everything possible to save lives, regardless of the cost. Osterholm had previously called for a nationwide lockdown, with workers and small businessmen compensated for lost wages and revenues.

On Sunday, he concluded: “You know, my worst fear is what we saw happen in other countries, where people were

dying on the streets. People literally were dying in the waiting room of emergency rooms after spending 10 hours just waiting to be seen. That’s going to start happening.

“The media will start reporting it and we will see the breadth and the depth of this tragedy. That, I hope, will not be the way that we finally decide to reduce our risk, this idea of swapping air. We’ve got to stop doing that. And so, I think it is the health care system’s breaking, literally breaking, that will unfortunately bring us to a sense of reality of what we must do in the short term.”

The Biden campaign had previously disavowed Dr. Osterholm’s earlier statement calling for a four-to-six-week lockdown to save lives, and he had been compelled to publicly distance this call from his work for the Biden transition. But the campaign was clearly aware that the doctor was to appear on “Meet the Press” and likely to deviate from Biden’s strict anti-lockdown, pro-corporate position.

So, Ron Klain, newly designated as Biden’s White House chief of staff, was made available to appear on the program immediately after Osterholm, almost as a rebuttal witness.

Klain made it clear that Biden would call only for a national mask mandate, not a lockdown. When interviewer Chuck Todd asked him about Osterholm’s declaration that those affected economically by a lockdown had to be compensated for their lost wages and income, Klain made only a vague reference to bipartisan congressional action during the current lame-duck session, before Biden is slated to become president.



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