

For emergency action to save lives! Close schools and shut down nonessential production! Full compensation for workers!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party
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This week, health care workers in the United States began to receive the first round of vaccinations for COVID-19. This is a significant milestone. However, the bitter fact remains that it comes amidst a pandemic that is completely out of control.

The number of deaths in the United States this week passed the grim milestone of 300,000. Nearly 3,000 people are dying every day, and hospitals are being overwhelmed throughout the country. Nurses and doctors are being forced to make the choice of who will receive care and who will not. COVID-19 is already the leading cause of death in the United States, surpassing heart disease and lung cancer. And new cases continue to rise.

This is death on a scale with no precedent in American history outside of war. In terms of deaths within the borders of the United States, the only event that is comparable is the Civil War, which killed 618,000 over the course of four years. Half this many have been killed in just one year from the coronavirus.

In the media, attention has shifted from the calamity that is unfolding to the production and distribution of the vaccine. The fact that the death toll has surpassed 300,000 is being treated as a secondary issue. And beyond references to a “dark winter,” no action is proposed to save lives.

Scientific studies confirm that, even in the best of circumstances, the vaccine will have little effect on the escalating death toll for more than three months. A report by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington published on December 4 found that, “despite vaccination scale-up, we expect 539,000 cumulative deaths by April 1.” This is 240,000 more deaths, or almost *a quarter of a million people*, above the current toll of over 300,000.

According to the IHME, “Vaccination is likely to speed the transition back to normal later in the year but will prevent only 9,000 deaths by April 1.” It estimates that, based on the current plans for vaccine distribution, 60 percent of the population will still be susceptible to the virus on April 1.

The estimate of 539,000 deaths by April is based on the assumption that most states will impose major new mandates on social distancing in order to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed. If such restrictions are eased—which is what many states are doing—the model projects 770,000 cumulative deaths by April 1, or another 470,000 people.

To sum up the present situation: A vaccine exists that will

prevent people from contracting the coronavirus. It will take four to six months to produce in adequate quantities and distribute to the population. Knowing this, however, the ruling class is refusing to take any emergency actions to save lives between now and then. But of what use is a vaccine to those who have already died?

The indifference within the political establishment and media to death on a mass scale can be described as nothing else than criminal. The deaths of hundreds of thousands of people are presented, not as a danger that must be avoided at all costs, but as an inevitability that the population must simply accept.

Trump, after losing the 2020 elections, is continuing with his fascistic conspiracies centered on the demand that there be no restraints on the spread of the pandemic. The Democrats, however, have nothing to offer but empty expressions of sympathy and a continuation of the same policy.

On Monday night, Joe Biden, following the official vote in the Electoral College making him president-elect, made only a passing reference to the pandemic toward the end of the speech, declaring that his “heart goes out to all of you who have fallen on hard times through no fault of your own.” Biden, however, proposed no emergency measures to halt and reverse this catastrophe. On this, the Democrats have no fundamental differences with the Trump administration and the Republicans.

While it is certainly true that workers are not responsible for the scale of death, the government and the corporations that it serves certainly are. If hundreds of thousands more people die between now and April, it will only be because the ruling class refuses to implement the necessary measures to contain the pandemic.

Drastic emergency measures must be taken now to stop this catastrophe! Every day that such measures are delayed means thousands of more deaths.

The Socialist Equality Party advances the following demands:

First, all nonessential production must be shut down immediately.

The advice that people should not gather in homes or travel, while necessary, is thoroughly hypocritical under conditions in which workers are being forced to go to factories and workplaces every day, most of which have little to no measures in place to protect workers’ lives.

While there is effectively no systematic contact tracing in the US, data that is available makes clear that workplaces are a main

source of outbreaks. A report published this week in *The Press Democrat*, a newspaper in northern California, concluded that, based on data it collected, “going to work is one of the riskiest things people do during the pandemic.”

A separate report published by Mlive.com on Monday found that of the 1,268 active COVID-19 outbreaks in the state of Michigan, schools and manufacturing and construction sites were second and third for the most common settings, following only long-term care facilities. Workers are sending in reports to the *World Socialist Web Site* every day of new cases in their plants that are being covered up by management with the collaboration of the unions.

Under the conditions of the pandemic, to send workers to factories and teachers to schools is no different from forcing people to enter a burning building. Industries where work is essential to stopping the virus and maintaining the basic functioning of society must have the most stringent safety measures, overseen by the workers and health care professionals.

Second, all schools and universities must be closed to in-person learning.

In the media, false information has been propagated that opening schools, as has been done in New York City amidst a sharp rise in cases, is safe. This is contradicted by scientific evidence. According to an article published in the journal *Science* yesterday (“Inferring the effectiveness of government interventions against COVID-19”), the closure of schools and universities has a large effect on reducing coronavirus transmission.

Third, a shutdown can be effective only to the extent that workers are fully compensated and have an income until they are able to return to work.

Resistance in the population to a lockdown, to the extent that there is resistance, is because it is presented as a situation where workers, as well as small businesses, will be left entirely on their own.

The \$600 a week supplemental unemployment benefit must be immediately restored and made available to all workers affected by the lockdown measures, without restrictions or reporting requirements. Small businesses must have real relief from rent and debt payments to ensure that they remain economically viable until it is safe to reopen.

Emergency resources must be directed to providing food and other necessities. There must be an immediate halt to all evictions, and the cancellation of mortgage payments, rent and student debt.

The claim that there is no money to implement such measures is a lie. It would cost \$120 billion a week to provide 200 million workers with \$600 in income. Three trillion dollars was handed to Wall Street by the Federal Reserve this year, sanctioned by the CARES Act, which was passed on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis in March. Three trillion dollars would be enough to pay emergency assistance for 200 million workers for half a year, by which time a vaccine is expected to be widely available.

These measures will be bitterly opposed by the ruling class and the entire political establishment. The present catastrophe is the product of the policies the corporations and the government have implemented. From the beginning, government policy was determined not by the imperative to save lives, but by the necessity to protect profits and ensure the endless rise of the stock market.

Again and again, the Democrats and Republicans claimed that nothing could be done to stop the pandemic or provide emergency relief, even as endless resources were shoveled to Wall Street and to bail out the rich.

This is why the necessary emergency action to save lives requires the full industrial and political mobilization of the working class. It is not a matter of making appeals to the Democratic and Republican parties, which will do nothing. The task is to organize the working class as an independent force to enforce shutdowns and prepare a nationwide political general strike.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers in key industries—Amazon and logistics workers, auto and manufacturing workers, educators and teachers, transportation workers, telecommunications and technology workers and other sections of the working class—to begin forming an interconnected network of workplace and neighborhood committees to organize coordinated opposition.

In every workplace where nonessential production is being carried out, these emergency action committees must enforce an immediate shutdown. It was through the action of workers, independent of the unions, that partial shutdowns were imposed in March. These were not sustained, however, due to the absence of a network of organizations controlled by the workers themselves.

The fight of workers extends beyond a single plant or workplace. It must involve entire industries, in fact, all sections of the working class, in confrontation with the capitalist class and its state. The fight to implement emergency measures to stop the pandemic raises the question of political power: who shall control society, the capitalist ruling elite or the working class?

Action taken by workers will not only have mass support within the US, it will inspire and encourage workers throughout the world, who face the same conditions and have the same interests.

The entire response of the ruling class to the pandemic demonstrates that capitalism is incompatible with human progress and life itself. The alternative to capitalism is socialism—the restructuring of social and economic life to meet social need, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to form committees, begin organizing walkouts and share information broadly on social media. The SEP is prepared to assist workers in organizing opposition, connecting workers in different plants and industries, and informing workers throughout the world about independent initiatives. We call on all those who agree with this program to contact us using the form below.

The coming weeks and months are absolutely critical. The action that workers take now can save hundreds of thousands of lives. There is no time to lose!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact