

Tennessee confronted with surge in coronavirus cases

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The state of Tennessee is experiencing a sharp increase in coronavirus cases, with the state Department of Health (TDH) reporting on January 2 an additional 17,330 COVID-19 cases and 63 deaths in a 48-hour period.

As of this writing, the state has 612,250 total cases and 7,168 deaths. More than 3,100 people are currently hospitalized for coronavirus. This means that nearly ten percent of the state's 6.8 million people have contracted the disease, making Tennessee the fourth highest infection percentage in the country.

According to the TDH, Tennessee has a 10.56 percent test positivity rate, more than twice the 5 percent target benchmark recommended by the World Health Organization. There are currently more than 80,000 active COVID-19 cases in the state.

In Davidson County, home to Nashville, the state's largest city, there have been 83,209 cases and 482 deaths, according to the Metro Health Department. This means that over 11 percent of the county's population of 694,000 have been infected.

In Shelby County, including the state's second largest city Memphis, there have been 70,142 cases and 925 deaths. However, Democratic Mayor Jim Strickland has refused to carry out even limited shutdown measures. The county is currently under a bogus health "directive," which merely encourages residents to stay home while leaving stores, restaurants and gyms open, and exempting religious services, including weddings and funerals, from its social distancing advisory.

Knox County, with the third largest city Knoxville, has 35,269 cases and 333 deaths. Hamilton County, with the fourth largest city Chattanooga, has 30,810 cases and 282 deaths. On December 31, 2020, Chattanooga's Republican Mayor Jim Coppinger

declared that the city's mask mandate will end on January 15, 2021. Like Coppinger's Democratic cohorts, both promote the back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns, which allows and even encourages the spread of the virus in order to reopen the economy and produce profits at the expense of workers' lives.

On December 20, Republican Governor Bill Lee issued a boilerplate statement, feigning concern for the well-being of workers who are forced to face the coronavirus pandemic head-on in the workplace for paltry wages. Lee signed an executive order limiting indoor gathering capacity to 10, a cosmetic measure, while allowing businesses, schools and even high school athletics to remain open.

"I am signing an order that will limit indoor public gatherings to 10 people. I believe high school sports are important for our kids, and they should continue," said Lee. He is merely asking businesses to let employees work from home for the next 30 days, after which the virus will still be raging, or else enforce mask wearing in the workplace.

"The State of Tennessee will continue to mobilize every effective resource in this war. COVID testing is available to everyone free of charge." But Lee's and the corporate oligarchy's real "war" is not against COVID-19 but against workers, allowing them to become infected in order to bolster the bottom line of major corporations.

Tennessee, like many states throughout the Middle South, has become a major destination for large multinational corporations over the last several decades. No fewer than 11 Fortune 500 companies are headquartered in the state, including the shipping giant FedEx, which is based in Memphis and maintains a workforce of more than 30,000 in that city.

Both US and foreign-based auto companies have

significant operations, including GM's Spring Hill Assembly Plant near Nashville, Nissan's Smyrna plant and Volkswagen's plant in Chattanooga. According to a 2018 report in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, a car rolls off the line in Tennessee every 20 seconds.

All of these companies are maintaining production at close to pre-pandemic levels. Fedex, like most other logistics companies, has benefited from the shift towards online sales over the last year. Fedex Express posted its best ever adjusted operating profits in the second quarter, which ended last month, and Fedex Freight posted its second best operating margin in 15 years, according to a report in *Freight Waves*.

Lee claimed in his December 20 speech: "Vaccines are being delivered to every corner of the state. We are getting hundreds of thousands of vaccines out to our nursing home residents and health care workers so they can be vaccinated."

But by December 22, the TDH reported that only 24,236 vaccinations had been administered. However, the health department then announced the same day that it will soon be receiving 50,000 Pfizer and 40,000 Moderna vaccines on a weekly basis. As of this writing there have been 126,887 total vaccinations, according to the *Tennessean*, including 73,624 over the past seven days.

Lee, near the conclusion of his statement, quoted Winston Churchill, likening the pandemic to the bombing of British cities by Nazi Germany. "We are in a cold, cruel phase of this pandemic. It will get worse before it gets better. I know you are tired. But we have got to double down. I am reminded of Winston Churchill's words during the darkest days of World War II: 'It would be foolish to disguise the gravity of the hour. It would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage.'"

This comparison of the coronavirus to a war against an external enemy to be met with "courage" from a united population obscures the fact that the real cause of the scale of deaths has been due to the deliberate policy of the political establishment, which has made protecting the wealth of Wall Street the primary and overriding objective of its response to the pandemic.

The response in China, which was able to keep deaths below 5,000, shows that the mass suffering of the pandemic was neither inevitable nor unforeseen. Even with multiple vaccines now available, the catastrophic

rollout means that tens of thousands more will die before they have the chance to receive the vaccine.

This demonstrates that the fight against further infections and death must be based on the independent mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system, which has produced this catastrophe.



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