

Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness exposes stark global inequalities in COVID-19 response

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As the world was told to breathe a sigh of relief with the inauguration of Joe Biden as US president, 17,350 people perished from COVID-19 infections across the globe. This was the single highest death toll ever recorded in one day. In the United States, COVID-19 claimed 4,385 more lives, and less than one month from now the death toll is expected to surpass half a million people.

The World Health Organization (WHO) executive board convenes this week at its 148th session to review the second report on the progress of the pandemic drafted January 6 by the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response. The report, which functions as a framework for the week-long meeting, sets out to evaluate the lessons learned from the global response to the pandemic and formulate resolutions for critical steps that must be taken to address the deficiencies the pandemic has exposed.

The entire report is a devastating indictment of the world's response to a pandemic that was both foreseen and foretold. And despite ample warnings, high-income nations and their leaders chose to place the preservation of their financial institutions and national interest above those of their population and the well-being of the planet. What is lacking in the report is a much-needed Marxist analysis that could provide a scientific context for these failings, which have seen nearly 100 million cases of COVID-19 infections and more than 2 million deaths.

One of the early critical points made in the report is the continual failure to apply comprehensive public health measures—including early case detection, contact tracing and isolation, physical distancing, hygiene and limits on travel and gathering—to stem the continuing and unacceptable transmission, illness and death that continues to take a terrible toll even as vaccination rollout has commenced.

The pandemic has only further exposed and deepened the inequalities that exist within and between nations. The panel found that “vulnerable and marginalized people” in several countries were deprived of health care and essential services. Access to diagnostics, therapeutics like oxygen and necessary supplies favored high-income countries. They cited vaccine nationalism as a threat of further fallout from the pandemic.

“We cannot allow a principle to be established that it is acceptable for high-income countries to be able to vaccinate 100 percent of their populations while poorer countries must make do with only 20 percent coverage,” the panel wrote. “COVID-19 did not start in the poorest countries, but they are suffering the greatest collateral damage, and they need enhanced solidarity and support from the international community.”

The global pandemic alert system is unusable and harmful in its present form. The panel calls for creating “a system of distributed information” where people in local clinics and laboratories working with real-time data and decision-making tools can provide the critical inputs to “enable reaction” in the order of days and not weeks to pathogens of epidemic risk. However, this requires political initiative on the part of nations “to hold themselves accountable for taking all necessary actions as soon as an alert is issued.”

The authors raise concern that experiences with previous pandemics, and evaluations and recommendations thereof, have not been acted upon. “There has been a wholesale failure to take seriously the existential risk posed by a pandemic threat to humanity and its place in the future of the planet,” they wrote. Additionally, they note that the WHO “has been underpowered to do the job expected of it.” Underfunding and lack of material support has impacted its ability to deploy personnel or containment resources to local areas. Due to rising geopolitical tensions that are straining social cohesion, the inability to engage in an internationally coordinated and cooperative fashion weakens the world's “pandemic alert and outbreak containment functions.”

However, rather than addressing the extensive critique offered in the report on the inept global response to the pandemic, the bourgeois press has preferred to latch onto relatively minor elements of the lengthy 34-page statement, which found fault with delays during the early response to the outbreak in Wuhan, China, by both the Chinese government and the WHO. Behind these glaring omissions in the mainstream press are nationalist interests that attempt to deflect responsibility for the toll the pandemic has taken on nations’

populations.

CNN's opening paragraph on the report leads with, "China and the WHO could have acted quicker and more forcefully to contain the start of the COVID-19 outbreak." Although highlighting some of the major points from the report, the *New York Times* ultimately turns to scapegoat the WHO, China and the Trump administration, ignoring the newspaper's complicity in instigating the policy of herd immunity and back-to-school initiatives.

The report attributes faults with the WHO's response to fundamental failures of high-income countries and their leaders. It states that lack of confidence in the WHO by some "member states" stems from deep divisions that have emerged over several years in global relations.

It is precisely the concrete principle of internationalism based on social need and not individual profit that could provide a global institution such as the WHO the political stability needed to declare a global emergency and enact an appropriate international response. The pandemic has demonstrated concretely, in the negative, the dangers the globe faces when not organized under international socialist principles.

However, the reality is that the WHO remains a bourgeois institution that can play only an advisory role. When the WHO declared a public health emergency of international concern just one year ago, only a limited number of nations heeded the warning and escalated public health measures appropriate to the danger.

"The panel notes with deep concern that the failure to enact fundamental change despite the warnings issued has left the world dangerously exposed, as the COVID-19 pandemic proves. The Independent Panel does not want to preserve yet another report to sit on the shelves, leaving historians to ask *what if* its recommendations had been heeded."

The panel highly commends the nurses and health care workers who stepped up to the herculean task in the pandemic, risking their livelihoods and lives "to innovate to help reorganize hospitals and health care services, manage COVID-19 patients, provide health messaging and, increasingly, establish and staff vaccine delivery systems." This took place despite a 6-million-person deficit in the global health care workforce.

Yet little has been reported in the press on this vital work by health care workers. The panel notes that more than 1,500 nurses, likely a serious undercount, have perished since October, and 70 percent of national nursing associations are reporting "high levels of mental health distress amongst nurses, together with physical exhaustion, verbal and physical attacks and discrimination."

The toll the pandemic has had on non-COVID health issues has been astronomical. Of 105 countries surveyed, 90 percent have reported some disruption in health services. Low- and lower-middle-income countries have borne the brunt of this. The World Bank calculated that there had been a loss of 7

percent in global GDP, which amounts to US\$6 trillion. Not surprisingly, countries that applied strict public health measures have seen better economic outcomes while also seeing less morbidity and death from COVID infections.

The authors write, "While the panel is cognizant that the pandemic is ongoing, and so the long-term trends in relation to economic impact are yet to be definitively established, we nevertheless believe that sufficient evidence exists to be confident that decision to implement strict public health control measures will leave economies at least no worse off than those that do not implement these measures while averting significantly more deaths and illness."

One of President Biden's first acts was to sign an executive order that halted the US's withdrawal from the WHO. Another was a federal mask mandate. Dr. Anthony Fauci spoke on Thursday to the WHO Executive Board, stating his appreciation to the WHO's global public health response and concluding, "The United States stands ready to work in partnership and solidarity to support the international COVID-19 response, mitigate its impact on the world, strengthen our institutions, advance epidemic preparedness for the future, and improve the health and well-being of all people throughout the world."

Rhetoric aside, the United States faces an unmanageable economic crisis, temporarily somewhat disguised by the infusion of a massive supply of money from the Federal Reserve and international banks. The massive accumulation of debt will accelerate harsher austerity measures and authoritarian methods of rule. The pandemic did not spring onto the world stage by chance. It was well known that such a pandemic would materialize and that it was only a question of when. The response to it was a byproduct of the outdated nation-state system organized under capitalism. The findings of the Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response's second report highlight the critical need for the socialist reorganization of the globe's resources.



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