

Business as usual as the US nears a half million deaths from COVID-19

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Globally, the rate of infection from COVID-19 and the death rates associated with the infection are slowing from the devastating winter surge that saw new cases exceed 750,000 per day, with deaths during a single 24-hour period peaking at over 16,000.

The impact of the pandemic throughout Europe, North America and South America was a direct byproduct of malign neglect that allowed schools and economies to open after the summer lulls. As the capitalist ruling classes clamor to reopen the economy, the rapidly emerging variants pose an existential threat as criminal government policies expose the population to repeated infections.

The death toll in the United States has been nothing short of horrifying. This week the number of dead will hit a half million, a number exceeding all American deaths, civilian and military, from World War II. Such a horrific statistic should be appraised soberly and carefully. The criminal policy allowing unrestricted expansion of the pandemic has had a particularly destructive impact on the working class.

Particularly remarkable is the acceleration of the death toll beginning with the surges after the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. As recorded by NBC News, the first 100,000 US deaths required 99 days (February 29–May 17); the second 100,000 deaths required 115 days, to September 19; the third 100,000 deaths took 86 days, until December 14; the fourth 100,000 deaths took only 36 days until January 19; and the fifth 100,000 deaths will require somewhere between 28 and 31 days, depending on when this week that terrible milestone is reached.

More Americans have died of coronavirus *since* the US presidential election, less than three months ago, than in the eight months that preceded it. By next week, more than 100,000 Americans will have died of coronavirus under the Biden administration.

As the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, explained, “The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on the USA, with more than 26 million diagnosed cases and over 450,000 deaths as of early February 2021, about 40 percent of which could have been averted had the

US death rate mirrored the weighted average of the other G7 nations.” This is not praise for the other G7 nations who have pursued profit interests over the safety of their populations. The United States has just been more egregious in this regard.

The Lancet continued, “Many of the cases and deaths were avoidable. Instead of galvanizing the US populace to fight the pandemic, President Trump publicly dismissed its threat (despite privately acknowledging it), discouraged action as infection spread, and eschewed international cooperation.”

Rather than taking a proper accounting of the efforts of the Biden administration to begin a rapid opening of K-12 schools, the bourgeois press has employed the impeachment debacle as a distraction and diversion, while at the same time concealing the real significance of the January 6 fascist coup attempt.

The media has gone on to praise Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago Teachers Union’s betrayal of the rank-and-file and have raised a hue and cry over why schools aren’t opening immediately. Over the weekend, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky’s primary focus, using the Sunday press shows, was to provide the financial oligarchs assurance that neither the new variants nor the high community transmission would deter the Biden administration from carrying out the agenda of big business.

When questioned by host Margaret Brennan of “Face the Nation” on CBS about holding in-person classes while the B.1.1.7 variant was spreading, Dr. Walensky assured her that, “the amount of disease in school is very much related to the amount of disease that’s in the community. There’s very limited transmission between students, between students and staff.” When such infections occurred, she blamed improper mask wearing and lack of personal responsibility. There was no discussion of the looming half-million dead.

It is of no consequence to Dr. Walensky that 99 percent of all counties in the US are in the red zone, meaning that transmission rates remain still too high under CDC guidelines for children to return to school without massive

protective efforts which virtually no school district has the resources to implement.

Walensky also went on to discount the detection of 1,173 cases of the UK variant across 40 states. Now, there are 17 cases of the South African variant across eight states, as well as three cases of the Brazilian variant. And to add another dimension to the crisis, the *New York Times* reported on Sunday that a team of researchers has found “seven growing lineages of the novel coronavirus, spotted across the country. All of them have evolved a mutation in the same genetic letter.”

The Q677P mutation in the virus’s spike protein was first detected in the US on October 23. By January 19, these new lineages now make up 28 and 11 percent of all the SARS-CoV-2 genomes sequenced from Louisiana and New Mexico, respectively. These cases have been predominately found in the south central and southwest of the United States. As of early February, GISAID data has shown there have been close to 500 viral sequences of this variant in the US.

Though it remains to be determined if these new variants are more contagious, the scientists studying these new mutations are concerned because they are located in a gene that determines how well the virus can bind to a human cell and enter it. More concerning is that these mutations are following a convergent evolutionary pathway that provides them a survival benefit. In a setting of high community transmission, they are facing evolutionary pressures to adapt.

In countries like Brazil, South Africa and the United Kingdom, where such variants became dominant, the outcome was a rapid surge in cases that led to health systems becoming inundated and death tolls soaring. What perplexed politicians and state officials was that the usual measures taken during the spring didn’t work with these new variants. A concerted effort and hard lockdown were required. The Netherlands and Norway, which faced their own fight with the UK variant, quickly adopted these strict measures and turned their pandemic curves. In the United States, the Biden administration is counting on the vaccine to avoid such choices.

However, according to the *Washington Post* vaccination tracker, only 38.7 million people have received one or both doses of the vaccines. Though vaccinations have sped up to around 1.66 million per day on a seven-day average, supplies of the vaccines cannot keep up with demand. California has used up more than 72 percent of its doses and is experiencing shortages in some areas. For instance, Dodger Stadium had to shut down vaccinations after exhausting its supply, having only received 16,000 doses last week.

Not surprisingly, there is little stomach in the media to

discuss any future lockdowns. If 100,000 deaths were shocking, 500,000 deaths and more leave them numb and callous. So ingrained has become the policy of herd immunity within the ruling class that a strategy to eradicate the virus is no longer conceivable as a point of discussion.

Yet principled epidemiologists like Dr. Deepti Gurdasani, a senior lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, have been on the front line warning Prime Minister Boris Johnson that the drive to open schools prematurely will squander the gains over the last several weeks. She is fighting for a COVID strategy she calls “zero COVID.”

Her strategy would require a lockdown of two to three months to reach a target level of under 10 per 100,000 infections per day before easing restrictions. In the interim, investment in fixing the test, trace and isolate programs need urgent attention and to be placed in federal hands. Additionally, vaccine distributions could be enhanced per vaccine protocols—two-dose regimens for targeted populations, improvement in infrastructure investment and safety in schools. This strategy would also remove any uncertainty around the evolution of new variants and possible impact on vaccine efficacy.

The course the ruling class is pursuing will only bring more death and suffering for the working class, who have paid dearly for the incompetence demonstrated by capitalist governments. The ruling class and their political servants have no clear exit strategy. They have no idea what the herd immunity threshold is or if it is achievable. Repeat surges and shutdowns have been the characteristic and unscientific reaction to the pandemic. Because profits will always be a primary objective, there is no hoping that they can come to their senses. Only the working class can turn the tide of social misery and prevent further loss of life.



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