

In first press conference of new administration

Biden silent on rise in COVID-19 cases, justifies attacks on immigrants

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The first press conference in the presidency of Democrat Joe Biden was significant both for what it covered, and even more for the topic that it avoided: the mounting death toll and ever-rising spread of infection due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Biden made brief opening remarks in which he said the United States would reach 200 million injections of some form of coronavirus vaccine by the 100-day mark of his new administration, on April 29. This doubled his initial pledge of 100 million shots, but at the current rate of 2.5 million daily vaccinations, the target will be easy to reach.

The US president said nothing about a much grimmer milestone that the United States is likely to reach at about the same time—600,000 dead from coronavirus, a total greater than the sum total of military casualties in every US war since the Civil War. Already, more Americans have died of coronavirus after Biden's election than before it.

If a spring surge develops, in response to the criminal decisions of both Democratic and Republican politicians to reopen public schools and virtually all workplaces, from bars and restaurants to major factories, the US death toll could quickly return to the worst levels of the winter.

Biden did not touch on any of these dangers, except to hail his own administration's efforts to force a general reopening of the schools, which he presented as another positive achievement, also to be carried out in the first 100 days.

The response of the assembled representatives of the corporate media was to join in the cover-up of the pandemic catastrophe. Ten reporters asked questions of Biden, from AP, PBS, the *Washington Post*, ABC, the *Wall Street Journal*, NBC, CBS, CNN, Bloomberg News, and Univision. Not a single one asked what Biden would do to prevent the deaths of 1,000 Americans every day.

These journalists reflect the consensus within the US ruling elite. The daily death toll is accepted as an unavoidable necessity, a cost of doing business. Schools and workplaces must be reopened in order to restart the US

economy: the extraction of surplus value from the labor of the working class, which is the basis of the capitalist system.

The main focus of the questions asked of Biden was the mounting humanitarian disaster on the US border with Mexico. More than 15,000 children are crowded into US detention centers, while tens of thousands of desperate refugees from Central America have been denied entry and pushed back across the border as Biden continues with very little change the cruel policies perpetrated by the Trump administration.

Biden was at pains to present his administration's policies as a radical break from those of Trump, making professions of a more humane approach, in contrast to Trump's vilification of immigrants as rapists and criminals. The rhetoric may be different, but the substance of the policies is the same, as are the horrific consequences for tens of thousands of refugees and migrants.

Dismissing claims by Republicans and right-wing media outlets like Fox News that immigrants are flocking to the United States because of his more liberal policies at the border, Biden pointed out that Trump too faced a surge of refugees in the early months of each year, when weather conditions in the Mexican desert are more favorable for the journey.

He also argued that migrants were coming because of the desperate and oppressive conditions in their home countries, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. This is of course true, but neither Biden nor his questioners raised the issue of the role of American imperialism in creating those conditions. Biden himself is implicated, since the most recent right-wing coup, in Honduras in 2009, was carried out under the Obama-Biden administration with the full support of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Biden claimed that thousands of children were being held under cramped conditions because Trump had dismantled the facilities previously built (under the Obama administration) to imprison them. He went on to argue, "The

majority of those crossing the border are being sent back, those over 18 and those who are single, and the vast majority of families.”

The only exceptions to the return of families were those which the Mexican government refused to accept. “We are in negotiations with the president of Mexico,” he said. “I think we are going to see that change.” The task of strong-arming Mexico has been assigned to Vice President Kamala Harris, who proved during nearly 20 years as a prosecutor in California that she will not be moved by the suffering of poor people.

If Biden’s professions of understanding the desperate plight of Central American refugees were genuine, the US administration would grant refugee status to them automatically, since they are fleeing dictatorships, gang violence and natural disasters. Instead, his government has invoked Title 42, the same one used by Trump, to exclude most Central American migrants on the grounds they may be carrying coronavirus.

Despite invoking the pandemic as a pretext for excluding most adult migrants, the US border patrol is not testing children for coronavirus when they are detained in crowded camps. Such tests are only carried out, many days later, when the children are transferred to the facilities run by the Department of Health and Human Services, where hundreds of infections have been detected.

Biden pronounced on a number of other topics, ranging from the filibuster (he is not yet prepared to overturn it), to Afghanistan (he said the US would not meet a May 1 withdrawal deadline but would be gone by the end of the year), to his expectations for the 2024 election (he said he and Harris would run for reelection, but was unsure what his opposition would be, or if the Republican Party would even exist) to North Korea (he said that it was the most serious foreign policy issue facing the United States).

The main foreign policy issue, on which he elaborated at some length, was China. The correspondent for Bloomberg News asked him a three-part question on topics of critical importance to business interests: whether he would maintain Trump’s tariffs on imports from China, whether he would ban imports of selected Chinese products allegedly made by slave labor (i.e., from Xinjiang, home of the Uyghur minority), and whether he would seek to cut off Chinese access to the international payment system, which would effectively cut off all US trade and investment with China.

Biden declined to answer any of these inquiries, although he described them, remarkably, as “legitimate questions.” (A cutoff of all US-China trade and investment would rapidly plunge the capitalist system into a global depression).

Instead, he sought to outline an ideological justification for

what amounts to a new Cold War directed against both China and Russia, but China particularly, based on the claim that the United States is leading a coalition of “democracies” against the global rise of “autocracies.”

While speaking respectfully of Chinese President Xi Jinping, with whom he has a long acquaintance, Biden said he did not “have a democratic, with a small d, bone in his body.” He warned that China was out-investing the United States in many areas of science and research; his administration would seek to change that. “The future lies in who can own the future as it relates to technology, quantum computing, a whole range of things, including the medical fields,” he said.

Biden noted the formation of the quad, aligning four major countries in the Pacific region, India, Australia, Japan and the United States, against China, and pointed out that he had convened the first meeting of the heads of state of this group.

He concluded: “China has an overall goal, and I do not criticize him for the goal, but they have the overall goal to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world. That is not going to happen on my watch because the United States is going to continue to grow and expand.”

Biden has discarded the “America First” rhetoric and bellicose tub-thumping of Trump, only to assert the interests of American imperialism in a more conventional but equally threatening form. He is asserting the traditional alliance structures established by the United States at the beginning of the Cold War, but with a new and more incendiary goal, and with the addition of many more volatile elements.

In Europe, the countries of Eastern Europe, generally run by right-wing dictatorships or extreme nationalist regimes, have enrolled in NATO’s anti-Russian campaign. In Asia, the formation of the Quad transforms India, still embroiled in border conflicts with China, into what amounts to a frontline state for US imperialism.

The rhetoric of the US administration may be soporific, but it is employed to promote policies that lead inexorably toward war in which the world’s biggest nuclear power, the United States, would confront the second and third largest nuclear powers, Russia and China.



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