

Abandonment of health measures threatens US COVID-19 resurgence

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On May 13, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reversed its guidance on mask-wearing, urging vaccinated people to stop wearing masks and socially distancing in crowded areas.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, in line with the statements of leading epidemiologists, warned that these guidelines would trigger businesses, states and municipalities to remove all masking and social distancing requirements for vaccinated and unvaccinated people alike.

These warnings have been confirmed. Nearly every major retailer in the United States, including Walmart, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Walgreens, abandoned nationwide masking requirements within days of the CDC's ruling, with no mechanism to verify whether those walking into their facilities are vaccinated or not.

Epidemiologists and workplace safety experts have vocally condemned the CDC's action. "It's such a mess! So many of us are really upset. It is incredibly frustrating!" Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, Senior Fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, told the *World Socialist Web Site* last week. "Inevitably, now state after state and business after business is saying you don't need to wear your masks if you are vaccinated."

From the beginning of the pandemic, workplaces have been a central source of transmission and broader outbreaks. The removal of any restrictions, under conditions in which nearly two-thirds of the population is not fully vaccinated, will lead to an increase in cases and deaths.

Over 500 people continue to die every single day from the disease in the United States. This translates to a death rate of 15,000 every month, or 182,500 every year.

The fact that hundreds of people are dying every single day from a disease that could be stopped through aggressive public health measures is treated as a non-event in the media. When the official US death toll

crossed 600,000, the media simply ignored the milestone, just like it downplayed last week's report by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation that the real death toll in the country is actually closer to one million.

Globally, moreover, new cases remain at or near record highs, and epidemiologists are warning about the dangers posed by new variants of COVID-19 emerging as the pandemic surges throughout the world.

Every day, 600,000 people test positive for the disease, a figure that vastly underestimates its spread. Daily deaths are at more than 12,000. In India, the total death toll has surged past 300,000. While the country is recording more than 4,000 deaths per day, given the scale of undercounting, the actual figure could be in the tens of thousands. In Brazil, the official death toll is approaching half a million, and the 65,000 daily new cases are just shy of records set in March.

On Sunday, Germany banned travel from the UK as a new variant of COVID-19—termed the B.1617.2 or "Indian" variant—is spreading rapidly throughout the country.

Dr. Feigl-Ding warned of the significant dangers posed by the new variant of the disease. "Pay attention to rising #B16172 crisis in UK—crucial because [the] Indian variant affects us all," Feigl-Ding wrote on Twitter. "It is now ~50% of all cases in England, surging fast, especially in kids. Hospital #COVID19 ward in Bolton filling up."

He noted that the new variant "is by leaps and bounds growing faster than any other variant. The previously fast #B117 is growing much much slower—5x slower than B16172." He continued, "Reinfections with #B16172 is also approximately ~4x more with B16172 versus #B117 if we compare the rates of reinfections / variant cases found. 4x ... is a lot."

The rise of COVID-19 variants that are increasingly resistant to vaccines is reason for utmost vigilance. Government policy, however, is in exactly the opposite

direction.

The CDC's mask reversal has created the conditions for an even more dangerous move. The ending of mask requirements in schools, placing the lives of unvaccinated students as well as teachers in danger.

On Tuesday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott banned mask mandates in public schools, declaring that "no student, teacher, parent or other staff member or visitor may be required to wear a face covering." On Thursday, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds banned schools from requiring masks, and South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster followed suit.

These actions come despite extensive scientific evidence showing that masking significantly reduces the spread of COVID-19 in schools. Dr. Leana Wen, the former health commissioner of Baltimore, condemned these moves, noting that "unvaccinated children need to stay masked around other unvaccinated people, including in schools. Nearly 1 in 4 new [COVID-19] infections are in kids. We need to help keep them safe."

The reduction of COVID-19 cases in the United States is the outcome of mass vaccination that came about as a result of an unprecedented effort by scientists and academic institutions to create a whole new class of vaccines in record time.

In a rational society, the reduction of COVID-19 cases would be used to strengthen protections ahead of what public health experts warn will be a new resurgence in the fall. But the Biden administration is squandering what health officials call a temporary reprieve to abandon measures to monitor and contain the disease.

On May 1, the CDC ended its monitoring of "breakthrough infections" of COVID-19 in people who are fully vaccinated, unless the disease leads to hospitalization or death.

Like the withdrawal of masking recommendations, the move has drawn condemnation from epidemiologists, who warned that it would leave the US blind to the effect of new COVID-19 variants.

"By the CDC not doing this level of monitoring, it's very reminiscent to me about how I felt in the Trump era: 'You're each on your own,'" Dr. Kavita Patel, a primary care physician and nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution, told the *Washington Post*.

The *Post* paraphrased Eric Topol, a professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research in San Diego, as saying that "the CDC should monitor those people, along with hospitalized and fatal cases, to determine whether and how virus variants might evade vaccine protection,

help discover new variants and track how well certain vulnerable groups, such as the immunocompromised, are shielded by vaccines."

The Biden White House, like the Trump White House before it, is seeking to convince the public to disregard the continued pandemic—in many cases leading by example.

The attitude inside the White House was summed up by a recent headline by NPR: "How the Biden White House Learned to Drop the Masks and Stop Worrying."

"At the Biden White House," wrote NPR, "it's like 2019 all over again, with large and largely mask-free events in the East Room both Thursday and Friday." Asked whether the White House was even tracking whether those in attendance were vaccinated or not, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told NPR bluntly, "That's not the role we're going to play."

As with similar displays under Trump, such callous disregard for public health and safety has the direct intent of sending a message: The pandemic is over. There can no longer be any obstacle—in the name of preserving public health—to the accumulation of private profit.

The stance of the Biden administration channels the demands of major corporations, which see efforts to save lives from COVID-19 as an unacceptable impingement on the extraction of profits from the working class.

If the response to the pandemic is left in the hands of this financial oligarchy, the disease that has already killed nearly a million people in US will take the lives of countless others. It is urgently necessary that workers take up the struggle against the pandemic into their own hands, both through the fight to create rank-and-file safety committees at workplaces and the political struggle against the capitalist system that subordinates human life to private profit.



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