

New COVID-19 wave in Taiwan exposes government's lack of preparation

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After more than a year of being held up as a model for its response to the global pandemic, Taiwan's medical system is being overrun by a surge in COVID-19 cases. As of Thursday, there were 9,974 confirmed cases on the island, including 366 new cases the previous day. Nearly 9,000 of those infections have occurred since mid-May.

The Taipei Doctors' Union warned in a Facebook post on May 27, "The coronavirus situation in the greater Taipei area continues to worsen, with an acute shortage of isolation beds and wards, as well as the [specialized] staff to run them." It continued, "If this isn't breaking point for the healthcare system, then we don't know what is." The statement warned that hospitals were facing a shortage of negative pressure and isolation wards, with general hospital wards being used instead, putting staff and other patients at risk of infection.

On May 28, Singapore-based doctor Lim Woon Tee, an epidemic prevention specialist, appeared on the Taiwanese talk show "50 Era Money" to call for a total lockdown on the island. In the interview, Lim blamed the government of President Tsai Ing-wen for wasting more than a year in preparing for an outbreak. He stated, "Taiwan is more vulnerable than any other country in the world."

The latest outbreak demonstrates that there was nothing exceptional about Taipei's initial response to the virus. What actions the Taiwanese ruling class did take were generated by fears that a botched response to the pandemic could fuel social discontent after widespread anger over its handling of the 2002–2004 SARS epidemic.

In January 2020, just as the pandemic was beginning, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party government of President Tsai Ing-wen accused China of lacking

transparency and used the outbreak, with Washington's support, to challenge the "One China" policy and call for inclusion in the World Health Organization (WHO). Under the "One China" doctrine, internationally accepted since the 1970s, Beijing is effectively recognised as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Tsai's accusations were aimed at drumming up anti-mainland sentiment, a campaign that is now being escalated by Washington, as well as Taipei, to ratchet up pressure on Beijing, risking war.

The outbreak also reveals that no country is safe from the pandemic as long as the virus is allowed to move freely anywhere in the world. It shows the necessity of maintaining scientifically mandated restrictions in order to eliminate the virus. However, Taipei, like every other capitalist government, chooses to prioritize big business profits at the expense of the working class and the poor.

Workers in the service, transportation, and tourist industries are being particularly hard hit as gatherings of five or more people are banned and many public facilities are closed. As of Tuesday, there were 445 companies that had implemented unpaid leave programs, up from 414 the previous week. Some 4,125 workers have been reported as furloughed without pay while other workers have had their salaries slashed. These statistics are likely an undercounting of the real situation.

Restrictions do not apply to the manufacturing sector. In Hsinchu city, where the industry-leading Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company is based, workers are being forced to stay on the job, leaving them exposed to the virus. Semiconductors are a major component in weaponry, and therefore considered vital in the war plans of the United States.

Workers may never see even the meager relief packages from the government as they are paid through the companies. Chairwoman of the Taoyuan Confederation of Trade Unions (TYCTU) Chu Mei-hsueh stated recently, “[W]e see that the government’s proposed economic relief packages are mostly the same as last year’s—they have to go through companies and bosses. Workers will again end up not receiving relief funds, because many employers would not report furloughed workers to the government when ordered to close for business.”

The TYCTU, a leading union confederation in Taiwan, portrays itself as a radical workers’ organization, but has played the central role in isolating strikes over recent years and preventing the development of a movement of the working class.

The TYCTU and its affiliated Taoyuan Flight Attendants Union were behind the sellout of the 17-day strike by EVA Air flight attendants in 2019, the longest in the history of Taiwan’s airlines. The sellout was all the more treacherous as airline workers around the world had been striking and staging industrial actions at that time. While issuing toothless complaints over the government’s current policies, the TYCTU has not organised any action against them.

The current outbreak also has broader international significance, particularly as the United States has attempted to leverage Taiwan as a tool against Beijing and to challenge the “One China” policy, under which countries recognize that Taiwan is a part of China. Last year, during the Trump administration, Washington backed Taipei’s attempt to gain observer status in the WHO, claiming that Taiwan was a positive force in the fight against COVID-19 while falsely accusing Beijing of being responsible for the pandemic.

The same geopolitical considerations underlie Japan’s recent pledge to donate vaccines to Taiwan. Tokyo entered into negotiations with AstraZeneca to send 1.2 million of its 120 million vaccine supply purchased from the company to Taiwan, even though the initial contract Japan signed with AstraZeneca bars it from exporting vaccines overseas. Tokyo could announce a finalized deal as soon as Friday. Beijing denounced Japan’s actions, with Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin saying on May 31, “We firmly oppose the use of the pandemic for a political show.”

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi stated Thursday, “At a time of trouble, we need to help each other.” However, there is nothing altruistic about Tokyo’s motivations. Members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party have called for supplying Taiwan with the vaccine in order to undermine Beijing. While countries like the United States have hoarded vaccines, China has offered to supply countries with its own vaccine, leading to accusations that Beijing is engaged in “vaccine diplomacy” to expand its influence.

Taipei, however, is engaged in its own version of “vaccine diplomacy.” Taipei has accused Beijing of interfering in a deal that fell through in January with drug maker BioNTech to supply vaccines. Beijing has denied this. According to Taiwan’s Health Minister Chen Shih-chung on May 27, BioNTech requested Taiwan remove the word “country” from the press release on the vaccine deal scheduled for January 8. The insertion of the word “country” was a clear attempt at undermining the “One China” policy. Taiwan supposedly offered to tweak the wording, but BioNTech still backed away from the deal.



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