The eradication of COVID-19 is the only way to stop the pandemic

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All over the world, COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths are again on the rise. The United States is again at the epicenter of the pandemic, with over 155,000 COVID-19 cases and 967 deaths officially reported Thursday. The number of breakthrough cases among fully vaccinated people rises each day, underscoring the dangers posed by new variants of SARS-CoV-2.

Falsely downplayed as a disease of the elderly, the virus is increasingly infecting young adults and unvaccinated children. In the second week of August, over 121,000 children tested positive for the virus and a record of over 1,900 were hospitalized in the US alone, figures which are set to skyrocket in the coming weeks amid the full reopening of schools.

At this critical juncture, how is the pandemic to be dealt with?

The battle lines in this global struggle have been clearly drawn. Three basic strategies for approaching the virus have emerged: 1) "herd immunity"; 2) mitigation; and 3) eradication. The global spread of the highly infectious Delta variant and the drive to fully reopen schools worldwide, despite the well-known risks to children, have sharpened the antagonisms between these three positions and made clear that global eradication is the only scientifically grounded and effective strategy.

Herd immunity

"Herd Immunity"—the bogus claim that the rapid spread of the virus among the younger and hardier sections of the population will create a human shield around the most vulnerable—is not a strategy for fighting the virus and saving lives. It is, rather, a cold-blooded policy aimed at protecting the financial, business and geopolitical interests of the ruling elites, whatever the cost in human lives. It opposes any anti-COVID measures that impinge on these interests, such as lockdowns, school closures and even masking. It promotes distrust and hatred of science, even to the point of encouraging resistance to vaccination.

"Herd immunity" began as a reckless experiment in Sweden, which refused to implement lockdowns in March 2020 and achieved a death rate nearly 10 times higher than its neighbor Finland. Sweden's chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell wrote to his Finnish counterpart on March 13, 2020, "One point might speak for keeping schools open in order to reach herd immunity more quickly."

This strategy was given ideological justification by Thomas Friedman of the "liberal" *New York Times*, who praised Sweden's approach and wrote on March 23, 2020, "Is this cure [of lockdowns]—even for a short while—worse than the disease?"

This phrase—"the cure can't be worse than the disease"—was immediately seized upon by Donald Trump in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Narendra Modi in India and other fascistic figures. Collectively, the countries that have pursued herd immunity most aggressively account for the vast majority of the estimated over 10 million deaths worldwide.

The herd immunity policy utilizes disinformation campaigns to spread confusion and conspiracy theories within the population, cultivating the most backward and fascistic conceptions. It has no scientific credibility and is based on the application of the 19th century Social Darwinist conception of the "survival of the fittest." Its utterly reactionary character was summed up in the words of Boris Johnson, who blurted out last November, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!"

Mitigation

The second strategic approach towards the pandemic is so-called "mitigation," an amorphous collection of measures that tries to negotiate between the realities of the virus and the financial interests of the ruling elites. This strategy amounts to the epidemiology of the golden mean.

There is a broad spectrum of mitigation measures that limit the spread of COVID-19, including masking, social distancing, testing, contact tracing, isolation of infected patients, ventilation, vaccinations, and others. Such measures have a role to play in reducing the velocity of viral transmission. But they do not lead to the effective containment of the virus and, in the absence of a strategy to sever the chain of viral transmission, can actually become counterproductive.

The two major elements advocated by proponents of the mitigation strategy are vaccinations and masking. Extraordinary claims have been made by the Biden administration in the US, Trudeau in Canada and many others worldwide that the simple combination of these measures will bring an end to the pandemic. These claims are based on a gross distortion of the character of the Delta variant.

First, it has been scientifically proven that the Delta variant is too transmissible and vaccine-resistant for vaccinations alone to put an end to infections. A recent theoretical model by Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz at the University of Calgary estimated that with 64 percent of the population fully vaccinated and assuming the vaccines have 60 percent efficacy against the Delta variant, the R (reproduction) number would likely remain at the highly elevated 3.7. Her model found that only through the combination of vaccinations and public health measures including lockdowns would the R number be reduced to 0.86.

Second, the types of masks used by the general public are totally inadequate for the Delta variant, which is vastly more transmissible and produces a viral load roughly 1,000 times higher than the wild type of the virus. Given this extreme viral load, some scientists have estimated that one second of exposure to the Delta variant is equivalent to 15 minutes of exposure to the wild type of the virus, with the widely-used cloth and

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surgical masks leaving individuals largely unprotected. To make matters worse, the masks are often used improperly by a public that does not clearly understand, as a result of miseducation and false information, the process of viral transmission.

This spring and summer, the Biden administration and other world governments proclaimed the pandemic to be over, presenting the vaccine as a magic bullet and telling vaccinated individuals they could remove masks and throw all caution to the wind. They sanctioned the full reopening of schools, claiming that unvaccinated children could be protected simply by mask-wearing. Within weeks, these falsehoods have been exploded by the reality of mass infections in schools and workplaces throughout the US, including an estimated 35,000 symptomatic "breakthrough infections" (the infection of vaccinated individuals) each week.

The mantra for the politicians and corporate media who advocate the mitigation strategy is that everyone must "learn to live with the virus." Proponents of mitigation fundamentally accept that COVID-19 will become endemic, that there will always be a persistent low level of infections and even periodic surges that strain hospitals to their breaking point. Economically and politically, the mitigation strategy accepts the basic framework that the interests of the corporations cannot be impinged upon.

Mitigation is to epidemiology what reformism is to capitalist politics. Just as the reformist harbors the hope that gradual and piecemeal reforms will, over time, lessen and ameliorate the evils of the profit system, the mitigationists nourish the delusion that COVID-19 will eventually evolve into something no more harmful than the common cold. This is a pipe dream totally divorced from the science of the pandemic.

In reality, as long as the virus spreads it will continue to mutate into new, more infectious, lethal and vaccine-resistant variants that threaten all of humanity. Unless it is eradicated on a world scale, the embers of COVID-19 will continue to burn and create the conditions for the virus to flare up anew.

Those who advocate the mitigation strategy want to negotiate with COVID-19, but the coronavirus refuses to negotiate with them. It is driven not by logical arguments, but by the remorseless laws of viral transmission.

Eradication

Therefore, the only viable strategy is eradication, based on the policies advanced by the foremost epidemiologists, virologists and other scientists throughout the pandemic. Eradication entails the universal deployment of every weapon in the arsenal of measures to combat COVID-19, coordinated on a global scale, to stamp out the virus once and for all.

The mainstream media in every country now advance the lie that the global eradication of COVID-19 is a "fantasy." But historical precedents for globally-coordinated eradication efforts exist for Ebola, smallpox, polio, and other diseases, all of which required a massive allocation of resources.

In an analysis presented last week in the international journal *BMJ Global Health*, Professors Michael Baker and Nick Wilson from the University of Otago, Wellington, determined that the global eradication of COVID?19 is theoretically more feasible than for polio but less so than it was for smallpox. They stress that the combination of vaccination programs, broad public health measures and a global interest in combating the disease could make eradication possible worldwide.

The key elements of containing and ultimately eradicating the pandemic are universal testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, the imposition of strict travel restrictions, and the shutdown of all schools and nonessential workplaces. Vaccine production and distribution must be rapidly expanded to quickly inoculate the roughly 5.8 billion people who remain unvaccinated worldwide.

The significance of regular, widespread testing and universal contact tracing—which have not been implemented in almost every country—cannot be overstated. These methods involve a highly active campaign to locate the virus and cut off its access to human beings. The only vulnerability of the coronavirus is that it relies on a human host to survive and replicate. If deprived of this host, the virus gradually dies off.

All other mitigation measures have a significant role to play, in particular the universal use of high-quality face masks and the renovation of indoor ventilation systems. But these are tactics which must be employed as part of a broader global strategy aimed at eradication. This must entail a relentless campaign of public education and the provision of enormous financial resources by every state to guarantee full income protection for all workers affected by lockdowns.

Undoubtedly, the eradication strategy is difficult. But every correct policy imposes a social cost. The necessary lockdown measures need only last for a few weeks or months, depending on the current rate of transmission in a given country, with travel between countries gradually resumed as they reach zero new cases.

The eradication strategy must be taken up by educators, parents, autoworkers, logistics workers, health care workers and the entire working class internationally in order to put an end to the needless suffering from the pandemic and save millions of lives. The Socialist Equality Party, in support of this program, calls in particular for the immediate shutdown of schools in every country where this policy is being pursued. Those advocating the reopening of schools for in-person learning are essentially calling for children to be sent into burning buildings.

Only a handful of countries have pursued the elimination strategy, including China, New Zealand, and some others, all of which must be studied carefully. However, recent outbreaks in each of these countries, as well as major surges in Australia, Vietnam and other countries that had almost entirely suppressed viral transmission, underscore that the eradication strategy must be global in scope and that no single country can defeat the pandemic alone.

The implementation of the eradication strategy requires the development of a powerful international and unified mass movement of the working class. Only a mass movement that is not driven by the profit motive and fettered to the obsessive pursuit of personal wealth can generate the social force required to compel a change in policy.

The basic principles guiding the eradication strategy are based on science and the insistence that there can be no limit on the amount spent to eradicate COVID-19 worldwide. The social interests of masses of people worldwide interact powerfully with scientific truth.

For this strategy to be successful, its proponents in every country must be imbued with a deep scientific understanding of the pandemic. The working class values and relies on the support of scientists, and the scientific program necessary to eradicate COVID-19 can only be implemented to the extent that great masses of people take up this struggle.

This Sunday, August 22, the WSWS is hosting an international online event involving leading scientists who have advocated for eradication since the start of the pandemic. We urge all our readers worldwide to register today and invite your coworkers, friends and family to attend this historic event.

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