

America's deadliest pandemic: COVID-19 eclipses the Spanish flu

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This month, COVID-19 officially became the deadliest outbreak of infectious disease in American history, eclipsing the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic that killed 675,000 Americans over two years.

This grim milestone comes as the daily death toll surges throughout the United States. A staggering 2,228 Americans lost their lives on Wednesday to COVID-19, after 2,152 died on Tuesday. By the time this article is published, the US death toll will have reached 700,000, according to [Worldometers.info](https://www.worldometers.info).

The official death toll in the US is higher than in any other country. The United States makes up just 4.2 percent of the world's population, but it accounts for 14 percent of the nearly 4.7 million deaths worldwide, according to official figures.

The hidden toll of the pandemic remains far higher than what is reported. A study from January of this year concluded that approximately 35 percent of COVID-19 deaths remain uncounted, meaning that the real US death toll is greater than one million, a figure consistent with a recent study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME).

More than 9.1 million years of life have been lost to COVID-19 in the United States, according to a study published this week in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. "Our results demonstrate that COVID-19 has not been a pandemic just for the old and the vulnerable, but also for the younger and healthier groups," noted the study's authors.

The catastrophic impact of the Spanish flu, like the COVID-19 pandemic, was the product of the conscious decision of the ruling class to subordinate the preservation of human life to profit.

The Spanish flu pandemic originated in the state of Kansas, but it spread throughout the globe, infecting a third of the world's population. It spread in the

trenches of World War I, notorious for their lack of hygiene and adequate medical care.

The very name of the disease, the "Spanish flu," reflected the efforts of the US and European political establishment to suppress popular knowledge of the disease's existence. Wartime censorship prohibited serious and honest reporting on the disease, but the press in Spain reported its spread, leading to the misnomer.

US President Woodrow Wilson, who was keenly aware of the deadly nature of the flu, never uttered a single public statement on the epidemic. Historian John M. Barry, author of *The Great Influenza*, noted, "In terms of managing a federal response to the pandemic, there was no leadership or guidance of any kind from the White House. Wilson wanted the focus to remain on the war effort. Anything negative was viewed as hurting morale and hurting the war effort."

The 1918 Great Influenza pandemic was intimately tied to the war that brought legions of troops across oceans together to fight a war for imperialist conquest. And despite the catastrophic toll that bullets, shells and land mines took on the troops, the influenza virus killed still more.

More than 100 years after the Spanish flu pandemic, human society is objectively far better prepared to stop and eradicate COVID-19. Highly effective vaccines against COVID-19 were developed in just 10 months. Revolutions in communications and information have made it possible to have detailed knowledge about the whereabouts and contacts of infected people. The ability to treat patients with effective and safe therapeutics is readily available.

However, the social relations of capitalism have prevented the rational use of these tools to save lives and end the pandemic. Even amid the massive surge of

deaths from COVID-19, the American ruling class has doubled down on its efforts to reopen schools and workplaces, leading to what experts warn could be a massive resurgence of the disease.

Instead of using these tools to eradicate the pandemic, capitalism has “normalized” mass death.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in December 2020 :

The normalization of death arises from the decision, rooted in class interests, to treat “economic health” and “human life” as comparable phenomena, with the former prioritized over the latter. Once the legitimacy of the comparison and prioritization is accepted—as it is by the political establishment, the oligarchs and the media—mass death is viewed as unavoidable.

The fact that thousands of people are dying every day is barely reported in the evening news and the mainstream media. These deaths, far from being seen as an unnecessary squandering of human life, are treated as a fact of life.

This is because the entire US political establishment has rejected the socially necessary and scientifically grounded response to COVID-19: its total eradication. The US ruling class has demanded the population “live with” the pandemic.

The working class must reject and oppose a policy of mass death! It must fight for a strategy of eradication, based on the policies advanced by foremost epidemiologists, virologists and other scientists. The pandemic can be ended, but this requires the deployment of every weapon in the arsenal of measures to combat COVID-19—the shutdown of schools and nonessential production, mass testing and contact tracing, in conjunction with vaccinations—coordinated on a global scale, to stamp out the virus once and for all.

As with World War I, which was the context for the Spanish flu pandemic, ending the COVID-19 pandemic requires an intervention by the working class, the only social force capable of waging a struggle to eradicate the deadly disease.



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