

US-led media campaign to “open up” China—an echo of the Opium Wars

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2 November 2021

A thoroughly cynical media campaign centred in the United States is being ramped up to pressure China drop its “zero Covid” strategy that has largely suppressed the virus within that country’s borders. A trickle of commentary over the past month has turned into a flood over the past week, spurred on by the decisions of governments such as Australia, New Zealand and Singapore to rapidly end health restrictions.

The offensive is being driven by two considerations—political and economic. Firstly, that the Chinese government’s scientifically-based policy has minimised the suffering, sickness and deaths from COVID-19 is a staggering indictment of the murderous “herd immunity” approach, particularly of the US.

The total number of deaths in China—most of which occurred in early 2020 when the government was wrestling with an unknown disease—are less than 6,000. That is less than the number of people dying every week in the United States, despite relatively high levels of vaccination.

Workers in the US and around the world can legitimately ask: if COVID-19 can be successfully suppressed in the world’s most populous country then why are these policies not being applied internationally to eliminate the deadly and highly contagious virus?

That question points to the imperious underlying demands of the financial and corporate elite that the health and lives of millions—in China and around the world—be sacrificed to the requirements of profit. Last week’s *New York Times* article, headlined “Why China Is the World’s Last ‘Zero Covid’ Holdout,”—tacitly assumes that a policy which has cost the lives of well over 700,000 Americans is one that should be adopted around the world, including by China.

Not accidentally, it is the financial and business press that are leading the charge for the Chinese government to open up—the *Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg*, the *Financial Times* and the *Australian Financial Review*, to name but a few.

The *Wall Street Journal*’s headline last week complained “China sticks to Covid-Zero policies, despite rising pressure to ease restrictions,” adding: “Businesses have called for a plan to end the strict pandemic regime, warning of the increasing economic toll.”

The economic toll on global capitalism, particularly on Wall

Street, is primarily what the *Journal* is concerned about as it highlights the impact of China’s public health restrictions on global supply chains.

“The fact that China is at the centre of most global value chains and with such draconian zero case policies, does have a bearing on the dysfunctional global supply chains,” Alicia García-Herrero, chief economist for Asia-Pacific at French bank Natixis, tells the mouthpiece for Wall Street’s bankers, fund managers and stockbrokers.

While the US is not at this point resorting to military force, the media campaign to “open up” China recalls the barbaric methods employed by imperialism to impose its demands on China—beginning with the Opium Wars waged by Britain, the leading power in the 19th Century.

The extremely profitable trade with China in tea, porcelains and silk was a magnet for all the trading powers, but the insistence by the Qing government that payment be made in silver became an intolerable financial burden. The British East India Company circumvented the problem by expanding the cultivation of opium in its Indian territories, selling it to private traders who passed it on to Chinese smugglers who exchanged it for silver.

This trade took a terrible toll as the smoking of opium escalated exponentially as did the number of addicts. Other traders, including Warren Delano Jr, the grandfather of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, joined the drug running operations. Failed efforts by the Qing emperor to stamp out the smuggling culminated in the deployment of Chinese troops to Canton in 1839 to forcibly close down foreign factories tied to the opium trade.

The outcome of the first Opium War was a humiliating defeat for the Qing dynasty at the hands of British naval power. The Treaty of Nanking in 1842 forced draconian concessions on China—the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain, the establishment of five treaty ports open to British traders and the payment of a huge indemnity to Great Britain. Associated with the ports were “concessions”—areas controlled by British authorities and occupied by the British, not the Chinese. Other powers soon imposed their own “unequal treaties” on China.

A second attempt in 1853 to end the financially ruinous and socially devastating drug trade led to a second Opium War that

also ended in defeat and a new round of humiliating impositions on China.

The looting of China by the imperialist powers drastically weakened the Qing Dynasty which faced major internal revolts—the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864 and the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901 that was suppressed by foreign troops—and was finally overthrown in the first Chinese Revolution in 1911 that established the Chinese Republic.

However, the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) and its leader Sun Yat-sen, who became China's first president, proved incapable of unifying China and ending imperialist oppression. While the country was never transformed into a colony, it remained a huge arena for plunder by rival powers.

The current demand for China to open up finds another echo in the “Open Door” policy pursued by US imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s directed in particular against Japan after it invaded Manchuria in 1931 and China as a whole in 1937. The “Open Door” policy had nothing to do with concerns for the Chinese population but was a demand that China not be the exclusive domain of a particular power and remain “open,” especially to US exploitation.

Leon Trotsky explained in 1924: “Beldam history made things easy for American capitalism: for every act of rapine there is a liberating slogan ready at hand. With regard to China, it is—the “Open Door” policy! Japan seeks to dismember China and to subjugate certain provinces by military force, because there is no iron in Japan, no coal, no oil. These constitute three colossal minuses in Japan’s struggle with the United States. For this reason, Japan seeks through seizure to assure herself of the riches of China. But the United States? It says: “Open Door in China.”

As then, the demand that China “open up” and end its health restrictions has nothing to do with any concern for the Chinese population but is aimed at removing all obstacles to profit at a terrible human cost. If the policy of “herd immunity” were to be adopted in China then it would undoubtedly lead to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of deaths.

Moreover, while it has not yet threatened China militarily over its zero-COVID policy, the US has over the past decade been accumulating other pretexts for war—from its hypocritical “human rights” campaigns over Hong Kong and the Muslim Uyghurs to trumped-up accusations of “aggression” in the South China and East China Seas and towards Taiwan. China, through its sheer economic size, is regarded as an intolerable threat to American global hegemony that must be reduced, through military force if necessary, to the new version of the semi-colonial status it endured in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The neo-colonial subjugation of China and its ending as a result of the 1949 Chinese Revolution remains deeply embedded in the consciousness of working people in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government of President Xi Jinping seeks to exploit this sentiment with endless

proclamations that the CCP is responsible for the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” This nationalist slogan is devoid of any progressive content—far from embodying any struggle against imperialism, it reflects the ambitions of a super-rich oligarchy, created by decades of the CCP’s pro-market policies, for a seat at the imperialist table.

Capitalist restoration in China has created immense social pressures as the number of Chinese billionaires continues to multiply while hundreds of millions struggle to survive. The CCP regime is acutely aware that it is sitting on a social time bomb and this has been a powerful motivation for maintaining its policy of eliminating COVID-19.

Indeed, virtually all of the articles currently pushing for a change in China’s policy acknowledge that it has widespread support among working people. The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, cites Yanzhong Huang, from the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, who declares: “This policy is also still very popular in China and receives strong public support: People are very proud of how well state leaders have controlled the virus.”

COVID-19 elimination, however, requires a global strategy as the continued outbreaks in China, including of the extremely contagious Delta variant, demonstrate. The CCP regime, however, as it seeks support on the international stage to counter threats from the US, is not waging a campaign for similar global measures or even criticising other governments.

The only social force that is capable of fighting for the global elimination of the pandemic is the international working class which will find broad support among workers and youth in China. The World Socialist Web Site and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees elaborated the scientific basis for the policy of elimination and the need for the working class to fight for it in its October 24 online webinar. We encourage all workers and youth to view it and contact us.



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