

The winter of death: Governments slash COVID-19 restrictions as cases surge

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Over the past week, the world reached two horrific milestones. The official global COVID-19 death toll surpassed five million, and the total number of cases passed one quarter of a billion. It is well known that these figures far understate reality.

“I don’t think the world has even begun to grieve this many deaths,” World Health Organization (WHO) technical lead Maria Van Kerkove said. “And we know it’s far, far higher.”

“Right now, we are seeing increases where we shouldn’t be,” she added. “There has been a more than 55 percent increase in cases over the past four weeks in Europe, where there’s ample supply of vaccines, where there is ample supply of tools.”

This week, COVID-19 case rates hit all-time highs in Russia and Germany. And cases are surging astronomically in the Eastern European countries of Slovenia, Estonia, Georgia and Latvia, which now lead the world in per capita cases.

Last week, the WHO warned that another half a million people could die in the ongoing COVID-19 surge in Europe by February, with the WHO’s Europe chief expressing “grave concern.”

Globally, cases have been increasing for three weeks, ahead of what experts warn will be a major surge as winter begins in the Northern Hemisphere. In the United States, which has historically followed the trajectory set by Europe with a delay of several weeks, the decline of cases amid rising vaccinations has ended.

“How many more people need to die?” asked Van Kerkove, “How many more countries need to be put into severe situations again, before we take action?” The US has made clear the answer to that question: “Many, many more.”

Today, the US is ending restrictions on international flights and land travel that have been in place for 20

months, in advance of an expected massive surge of travel to the country. Delta Airlines is expecting a 50 percent increase in inbound flights, reporting that it is seeing “high demand.” The airline’s CEO said, “It’s going to be a bit sloppy.”

Throughout the US, all restrictions on the spread of the pandemic are being eliminated. The Miami-Dade school district, the largest in Florida, recently announced that it is eliminating its mask mandate in middle and high schools, as the latest district in Florida to do so. In Georgia, a number of districts, including Fulton County, which includes Atlanta, have ended mandates, while Michigan school districts have announced plans to do the same.

ABC News reported, “According to Burbio, a company that monitors COVID-19 policies in schools, more than a dozen of the 200 largest school districts in the US have dropped mask mandates in recent weeks.”

For the United States, this will be a winter of mass death. According to the official count, 775,000 Americans are dead, averaging out to more than 1,200 per day since the pandemic started. Even as all measures to stop the disease are being abandoned, over 1,000 people are dying every single day.

Mass death is being normalized, to be treated as background noise.

?The horrendous death toll in the United States, far from being an instructive example to be avoided at all costs, is only being emulated around the world. Last month, New Zealand abandoned its “Zero Covid” policy, sending hundreds of thousands back to work and partially reopening schools in Auckland. The results have been predictable. Over the past month, the daily new COVID-19 cases in New Zealand have increased five-fold.??

Countries in Asia, including Singapore and Vietnam,

that have abandoned their efforts to eliminate COVID-19 have experienced a surge in cases. Undeterred by this disastrous precedent, Japan is further loosening restrictions, slashing the mandatory quarantine period for business travelers from 10 days to three days.

With winter approaching for the Northern Hemisphere, home to 87 percent of the human population, the world is once again at a turning point in the pandemic. Capitalism is intent on allowing the deaths of countless human beings—mothers, fathers, children, and the elderly—from an entirely preventable pandemic.

This horrendous, daily slaughter must be ended! As leading scientists explained at the October 24 webinar, sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, humanity possesses the means to end the pandemic in a matter of months through a strategy of global elimination, the foundation for the final eradication of the virus. This requires the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, coupled with massive investment in testing, quarantining, and contact tracing, and full economic support to employees of businesses closed for health reasons.

The struggle for these policies, however, requires a frontal assault on the wealth and power of the financial oligarchy.

The pandemic, with all of its horrors, has been a bonanza for the world's billionaires, who have massively enriched themselves through massive government intervention to prop up the stock markets, while workers have been compelled back on the job in unsafe workplaces that are major centers of COVID-19 transmission.

At the start of 2020, America's billionaires had a net worth of \$3.4 trillion, which has since soared to \$5.3 trillion. Since the start of the pandemic, Elon Musk, the world's richest man, has become \$300 billion wealthier. Jeff Bezos has become \$75 billion wealthier. And Google co-founder Larry Page has received more than \$64 billion.

Bezos profited as countless of his workers became infected and died through diseases they caught in his warehouses. Musk, defying California authorities, illegally restarted production at his Tesla plant in California, for which he has never been held to account.

The ruling class is, in fact, waging an elimination policy—not of the pandemic, but of human beings. Under the political status quo ante, the pandemic will continue in perpetuity, reaping its grim harvest month after month.

But the social force that can, and will, put an end to these homicidal policies is already emerging on the scene. In the United States, thousands of workers are now on strike, as part of a global strike movement. The *World Socialist Web Site* is fighting to arm this movement of the working class with the socialist perspective and scientific knowledge necessary to put an end to the pandemic.



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