

Scientists call for urgent action to save lives as Omicron variant of COVID-19 spreads globally

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Over the weekend, new cases of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, which appears to spread more rapidly than other strains and could be deadlier, were found in Australia, Belgium, Botswana, Britain, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, France and Canada.

The rapid spread of the new variant has been greeted with passivity by governments around the world, which have rejected the closures of schools and nonessential businesses even as the current surge of the Delta variant has led to record COVID-19 cases.

“The Omicron variant is probably everywhere, and it now has a huge capability to mutate,” immunologist Dr. Anthony Leonardi told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“As it outpaces Delta, it’s going to create even more infections. It’ll therefore evolve even faster than Delta. But you never know because any one of these variants can now get into an immunocompromised person and just do some fantastic evolution.”

Leonardi added, “And, so, we have to change how we deal with it completely.”

Condemning government complacency, Leonardi tweeted yesterday, “If you wait for bodies to pile up as evidence, those are your friends, family, and neighbors. It’s unethical to sit on your hands. The spike has shifted conformation at many key sites. The spread is rapid in places with high convalescence. Be responsible!”

Epidemiologist Eric Feigl-Ding tweeted, “Lots of misinformation now being floated that #Omicron is ‘mild.’ That’s nonsense — based on out-of-context quote. Don’t fall for it — nobody knows that much yet. And hospitalizations are still rising in the hardest hit

#B11529 dominant provinces in South Africa.

On Sunday, Anthony Fauci, the chief medical adviser to US President Joe Biden, refused to call for any new measures to stop the dangerous new variant, instead insisting the population had to “live with” the disease.

Dr. Jorge A. Caballero, in response to Fauci’s appearance on “Meet the Press,” tweeted, “I’ve seen enough. We need bold strategic changes, and the current White House Response team isn’t up to the task ... Omicron variant should be a wake-up call. If today’s Sunday Morning talk shows are any indication, the White House COVID Response team is asleep at the wheel.”

He added, “Global data strongly suggests that we need more than 85 percent of the *total population* to be fully vaccinated in order to *safely* relax mask mandates.”

“Given that the Omicron variant may at least partially evade the protection offered by vaccines, it is important that all countries expand public health and social measures to limit COVID-19 transmission,” Yaneer Bar-Yam, founder of the World Health Network, said. “The public must be warned about the importance of public health measures in addition to vaccination to safeguard their own health and family members.”

Dr. Małgorzata Gasperowicz, a developmental biologist and researcher at the University of Calgary, tweeted, “[COVID] Waves don’t come on their own. Bad policies make waves!”

The United States’ response to the pandemic has been disastrous. Close to 50 million have been reportedly infected, and more than 800,000 have died. Already in 2021, more than 425,000 people perished from COVID-19. By comparison, in 2021 only two

people died of COVID in China, which is actively carrying out a COVID-19 elimination strategy.

In just two weeks, cases of COVID-19 in South Africa have grown sixfold, from a low of 265 to 1,666 on a seven-day average. Yesterday, South Africa reported 3,220 new infections. Based on sequencing data, Omicron is expected to displace Delta entirely. Meanwhile, South Africa's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is reporting that in Gauteng, South Africa, a highly urbanized and populated province in South Africa, hospitalizations have tripled in the last two weeks, rising from 135 to 418 admissions.

During an online press briefing, the head of the intensive care unit at Soweto's Baragwanath Hospital, Rudo Mathivha, explained, "We are seeing a marked change in the demographic profile of patients with COVID-19. Young people, in their 20s to just over their late 30s, are coming in with moderate to severe disease, some needing intensive care. About 65 percent are not vaccinated, and most of the rest are only half-vaccinated. I'm worried that as the numbers go up, the public health care facilities will become overwhelmed."

The spread of the Omicron variant, coming on top of a global surge in cases driven by the Delta variant, threatens a massive increase in cases and deaths throughout the world. The international working class must take up the demand and fight for emergency public health measures that scientists insist are necessary, including the immediate shutdown for schools and nonessential businesses, combined with a coordinated program of testing, contract tracing and isolation, to prevent a catastrophic surge of the pandemic.



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