Omicron variant exposes “vaccine only” strategy to combat COVID-19

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1 December 2021

To the extent that the Trump and Biden administrations ever had a plan to combat COVID-19—other than achieving herd immunity by allowing the massive spread of the virus through the population—it has been based on the conception that the development of a vaccine would, like a “magic bullet,” bring the pandemic under control.

From the start of the crisis in early 2020, while Trump still held the presidency, the corporate-financial elite opposed the implementation of public health measures that epidemiologists and virologists advocated to block the transmission of the virus. Only under pressure from workers who confronted the rapid spread of Sars-CoV-2 through their factories, such as in the meatpacking and auto industries, Washington and various state and local governments temporarily acceded to demands for lockdown and social distancing. However, no sooner had Congress passed the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of banks and corporations (the CARES Act) in March 2020, the media instigated a campaign for the ending of public health measures.

Sanctioned by the insidious slogan that “the cure can’t be worse than the disease,” i.e., that the cost of fighting COVID-19 must not be at the expense of corporate profits and the accumulation of private wealth, businesses were prematurely opened. Claiming without any evidence that young people were immune to the virus, calls for the reopening of schools rapidly emerged as the battle cry of all the forces demanding a full reopening of the economy and a “return to normal.”

While the death toll rose inexorably throughout the second half of 2020, the public was reassured that the development of vaccines would bring an end to the pandemic in the United States.

The production of effective vaccines by Pfizer and Moderna in late 2020 was hailed universally as the long-awaited panacea that would prove that public health measures were not necessary.

In his November 13, 2020 news conference on the “Operation Warp Speed” COVID-19 vaccine initiative, Trump—even while he prepared for a coup d’état to overthrow the results of the presidential election—declared, “This administration will not go, under any circumstances—will not go to a lockdown.”

The January 6, 2021 insurrection failed, and Biden assumed office exactly two weeks later. But the failure of Trump’s coup attempt did not produce a change in the US government’s approach to the fight against COVID-19. The “magic bullet” strategy not only continued; the drive to reopen the economy and return young people to schools was intensified. All the evidence that young people were not immune to COVID-19 and that schools would be a major source of viral transmission was brushed aside.

Even the use of masks, a public health measure critical to stop viral transmission, was abandoned. The government agency principally responsible for directing the fight against COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), delayed acknowledging that SARS-CoV-2 was spread via aerosols, i.e., infinitesimally small airborne viral particles. In mid-May 2021, just as a new and disastrous surge in infection was beginning, the Biden administration announced that it was ending mask mandates.

The vaccine-only strategy has been advocated by both the Trump and Biden administrations and the financial-corporate interests that dictate policy for three bad reasons.

First, it conforms entirely with the economic interests of the corporate and financial elite by supposedly making unnecessary aggressive public health measures that would impinge on corporate profits.

Second, it is essentially a national solution, which could ultimately be used as a tool to strengthen the position of the American ruling class in relation to its main geo-strategic rivals.

Third, it is a pragmatically simplistic and individualistic approach that does not require a broad-based and coordinated social response to the pandemic.

Scientists and experts in the sphere of public health have repeatedly warned that the exclusive emphasis on vaccinations could not bring about an end to the pandemic. While vaccines are a powerful weapon in fighting SARS-CoV-2, their ultimate effectiveness depends on their use within the framework of a global, not national, public health strategy aimed at the elimination and eradication of the virus. Apart from such a strategy, vaccinations can do no more than mitigate the spread of the virus and leave open the danger for the emergence of variants that overwhelm the limited defense provided by the existing vaccines.

These warnings have been tragically confirmed by the discovery of the new Omicron variant. In addition to being more infectious, Omicron is far more evolved from the original strain, meaning that existing vaccines will be less effective. On Tuesday morning, the *Financial Times* published an interview with Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel, warning, “There is no world, I think, where [the effectiveness] is the same level… we had with [the] Delta” variant.

Bancel added, “I think it’s going to be a material drop” in effectiveness. “[A]ll the scientists I’ve talked to… are like ‘this is not going to be good.’” He said scientists had not expected that such a highly mutated variant would emerge for another year or two.

That is, the Omicron variant raises the danger that the whole pandemic will be set back to square one. And if it is not the Omicron variant, it will be another.

The emergence of the Omicron variant has exposed the catastrophic consequences of the nationalist policy of the United States—along with the other major capitalist countries—to the pandemic. In his interview

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with the *Financial Times*, Bancel made a revealing statement in response to those who have criticized Moderna for not doing enough to distribute the vaccine globally. “This was mostly a policy decision by the rich countries,” he said. “In the US, we were told we had no choice but to give 60 percent of our output to the US government.”

This “Fortress America” strategy of vaccination in one country has now confronted the fact that the pandemic is a global crisis that can only be resolved on a global scale. The evolution of a new strain that appears to have originated in southern Africa, where a tiny percentage of the population is fully vaccinated, has quickly spread throughout the world.

Even within the United States, the ruling class confronts the resistance of a substantial portion of the population to vaccination. Less than 60 percent of the US population is fully vaccinated. In Michigan, the current epicenter of the pandemic in the US, less than 55 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

It is easy enough, and not very helpful, to blame the refusal of a large section to the population to vaccinate itself on backwardness and ignorance. No doubt, the pandemic has cast a disturbing light on deep and malignant cultural problems within the United States. But the task of social education is undermined when the government and media, far from attempting to educate the public, relentlessly suppress scientific knowledge and propagate lies and misinformation.

Even as news of the Omicron variant emerged, the government immediately sought to downplay the dangers. Biden went before the press to offer the vacuous reassurance that all will be well. He explicitly rejected the imposition of lockdowns or any other public health measures to counter the new threat. Nothing should be allowed to get in the way of the all-important—to Wall Street—Christmas shopping season!

For two years, the response to the pandemic has been subordinated to the interests of the ruling class. Millions of lives have been sacrificed at the altar of profit.

This is why the fight against the pandemic is not purely a medical issue. Nor is it a matter of pleading with governments to adopt a different policy, since the actions of governments are determined by the class interests that they represent.

The Omicron variant makes clear that there is no viable strategy to stop the pandemic and save millions of more lives other than a strategy of global elimination and eradication. This requires and entails the combination of global vaccine production and distribution with the entire arsenal of public health measures: the closure of schools to in-person learning, the shutdown of non-essential production, mass testing and contact-tracing, and the safe isolation of infected individuals.

The implementation of this strategy, however, requires the development of a mass social movement in the working class. The response to the virus must be taken out of the hands of the ruling class. In every workplace and factory, in the US and internationally, rank-and-file committees must be built to enforce the shutdown of unsafe facilities and the closure of schools to in-person learning. Where workplaces remain open, safety committees must control conditions and ensure that workers are protected.

The development of a mass movement against the criminal policies of capitalist governments requires the education of workers and young people on the nature of the pandemic. The Global Workers Inquest, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*, will play a major role in providing the social and political impulse for the mobilization and intervention of the working class in the fight to end the pandemic.

The emergence of the Omicron variant and its rapid spread throughout the world proves the urgency of the Inquest and the strategy advanced by the WSWS at its webinar of October 24, 2021, as the basis for the fight to end the pandemic.

• The target of SARS-CoV-2—the virus that causes COVID-19—is not individuals, but entire societies. The virus’ mode of transmission is directed toward achieving mass infection. SARS-CoV-2 has evolved biologically to strike billions, and, in so doing, kill millions.

• Therefore, the only effective strategy is one based on a globally-coordinated campaign aimed at the elimination of the virus on every continent, in every region and in every country. There is no effective national solution to this pandemic. Humanity—people of all races, ethnicities and nationalities—must confront and overcome this challenge through a vast collective and truly selfless global effort.

• The policies pursued by virtually all governments since the outbreak of the pandemic must be repudiated. The subordination of that which should be the unquestioned priority of social policy—the protection of human life—to the interests of corporate profit and private wealth accumulation cannot be allowed to continue.

• The initiative to bring about a decisive turn to a strategy directed toward global elimination must come from a socially-conscious movement of millions of people.

• This global movement must draw upon scientific research. The persecution of scientists—many of whom labor under threats to their livelihoods and even their lives—must be ended. The global elimination of the virus requires the closest working alliance between the working class—the great mass of society—and the scientific community.

We appeal to workers and student youth to build support for the work of the Inquest and the circulations of its findings as widely as possible. We also appeal to scientists and all those active in the sphere of public health to provide information and professional assistance in advancing the work of the Inquest.

Toward this end, contact the WSWS using the form below.

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