

Lives before profits! Stop the pandemic!

Statement of the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
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On Friday, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the Omicron variant of COVID-19 has now been found in 38 countries on every inhabited continent. In the United States, the variant has already been discovered in 12 states, including among individuals with no known travel history, demonstrating that it is spreading widely throughout the country.

In South Africa, the first country in which the new variant has become dominant, it is growing at a rate unseen in any country during the entire pandemic. The number of COVID-19 cases has risen nearly 40-fold over one month, from under 300 to 11,000 on Friday. Between Thursday and Friday, the number of new cases increased by 35 percent in just one day.

Perhaps most troubling of all, South Africa is facing a sharp rise in cases for children under the age of five, overwhelming pediatric hospitals in some cities.

With the Delta variant already producing record levels of new cases in several US states, the unprecedented dangers posed by the new variant has left the entire policy of the ruling class in shambles, and they know it. As the *New York Times* wrote, “After nearly a year of pushing vaccination as the way out of the pandemic,” there is a “tacit acknowledgment by the White House that vaccination is not enough to end the worst public health crisis in a century.”

In other words, the narrative which the Biden administration sought to legitimize in the premature reopening of schools and businesses—that vaccination alone could put an end to the pandemic—is totally disintegrating in the face of mounting evidence that Omicron is not only more transmissible than other variants of COVID-19 but increasingly resistant to vaccination.

“There is no world, I think, where [the effectiveness of existing vaccines] is the same level,” Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel told the *Financial Times* earlier this week. “I think it’s going to be a material drop. . . . But all the scientists I’ve talked to . . . are like, ‘This is not going to be good.’”

Regeneron, the maker of a monoclonal antibody treatment for COVID-19, warned in a statement that its treatments may be less effective against the new variant. “The individual mutations present in the Omicron variant indicate that there may be reduced neutralization activity of both vaccine-induced and monoclonal antibody conveyed immunity.”

A preprint study published Thursday by epidemiologists in South Africa found that the Omicron variant may be 2.4 times more effective at reinfecting people who had been previously infected with COVID-19. The variant “demonstrates substantial population-level evidence for evasion of immunity from prior infection,” warned the authors.

In response to the undeniable surge in cases in South Africa, numerous media reports have claimed that many of the cases of the Omicron variant are mild, implying that the new variant is nothing to worry about.

But this latest retelling of Trump’s fable that COVID-19 will simply “disappear” is the most dangerous. The fact that hospitalization rates in South Africa are increasing with the spread of Omicron already exposes the false claims of a “mild variant.” Moreover, throughout the pandemic most people who were infected would recover. The massive level of death is due to the infection of hundreds of millions of people.

The fact that the Omicron variant is far more infectious than Delta means that, even if it was somewhat less deadly—a claim that has no basis in fact yet—the larger number of cases will mean more hospitalizations and, if hospitals get overwhelmed, a massive increase in deaths.

Despite the growing threat of the new variant, the Biden administration has reiterated its rejection of the closure of schools and nonessential businesses, a policy that is being followed in its essentials in all the countries of Europe and the Americas.

The White House’s plan, the president restated Thursday, “doesn’t include shutdowns or lockdowns but widespread vaccinations and boosters.” Biden stated bluntly, “While over 99 percent of our schools are open

now, we need to make sure that we keep that throughout the winter.”

Biden even demanded an end to quarantining children exposed to COVID-19, declaring that students should “stay in a classroom and be tested frequently when a positive case in that classroom popped up,” instead of going home.

Echoing these points, New York Governor Kathy Hochul stated, “I’m not prepared to shut down schools or the economy. That is not a necessary response.”

Only two months ago, the US media was filled with stupid comments about the end of the pandemic. “Covid-19 is once again in retreat,” wrote David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* on October 4, claiming that a slight drop in cases indicates that the worst of the pandemic is likely over: “... the vaccines can transform Covid into a manageable disease, not so different from a flu or common cold. ... Whatever the autumn brings, the worst of the pandemic is almost certainly behind us.”

“What If Things Are About to Get Better?” the *Times*’ Paul Krugman mused on October 7. The availability of the vaccine means the population “can feel fairly safe going back to the office, going out to eat and—most important of all—sending their children to school.”

In its August 20 statement, “The eradication of COVID-19 is the only way to stop the pandemic,” the WSWS explained, opposing those who advocated a “mitigation” or “vaccine-only” strategy: “As long as the virus spreads it will continue to mutate into new, more infectious, lethal and vaccine-resistant variants that threaten all of humanity. Unless it is eradicated on a world scale, the embers of COVID-19 will continue to burn and create the conditions for the virus to flare up anew.”

A policy of elimination and eradication has been rejected by capitalist governments and the ruling class because the necessary measures to save lives impinge on private profit and the wealth of the oligarchy.

This policy has led to the deaths of more than 5.2 million people globally, including more than 800,000 in the United States alone, according to official figures. If an urgent change in policy is not enacted, the massive death toll so far will be a mere down payment on the numbers of people killed by the Omicron variant and whatever new and deadly variants follow.

This madness must end! There is only one viable policy: The pandemic must be stopped! Lives must not be sacrificed for profit!

COVID-19 can be eliminated, or even eradicated, through the implementation of urgent public health

measures. This means the creation of a massive, multitrillion-dollar program to allow for the closure of schools and nonessential businesses, investment in testing, contact tracing, and safe quarantine facilities, a global program to quickly vaccinate the whole world, and the provision of high quality N95 or better masks and other airborne protections at all essential workplaces.

China, where just two people have died of COVID-19 this year, has shown that this program can be achieved on a national level. But the global elimination and ultimate eradication of COVID-19 requires a globally coordinated offensive against the disease.

This requires the development of a mass movement in the working class, premised on the repudiation of the entire policy that profit interests must be “balanced” against saving lives. Workers must begin making preparations now, including by forming rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, school and neighborhood, to demand and fight for the measures necessary to save lives.

The global surge of the Omicron variant is still in its infancy. By taking immediate action now to end all transmission of COVID-19, the cost of eradicating the disease would be vastly lowered than if this variant is allowed to spread and displace, or even complement, the currently dominant Delta variant.

The emergence of the Omicron variant and its rapid spread throughout the world proves the urgency of the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*. We appeal to workers and student youth to build support for the work of the Inquest. 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.



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