

China's Zero COVID policy proves that the elimination of COVID-19 is possible

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The *World Socialist Web Site* published yesterday a detailed analysis of China's Zero COVID policy that demands careful study by anyone who wants to understand what must be done to end the pandemic. The meticulous review of the measures taken successfully by China to rapidly bring the spread of SARS-CoV-2 under control is, by implication, a devastating exposure of the disastrous policies pursued by the US and European governments.

By implementing its Zero COVID policy, China, with 1.4 billion people, has kept total cases below 100,000 and total deaths below 5,000 (including just over 10,000 cases and only 3 deaths since April 2020). By comparison, the United States, with less than a quarter of the population of China, has had more than 50 million cases and 800,000 deaths. To put it another way, if the US had succeeded in containing the virus with the same efficiency as China has, the death toll would be less than 1,000.

China's rigorous controls on international travel—made necessary by the massive spread of the virus globally—have been combined with aggressive public health measures within the country to contain outbreaks, including targeted lockdowns, the isolation of infected individuals, mass testing and contact tracing.

The policy has not only saved millions of lives, but it has, remarkably, allowed the population to move about and interact freely for most of the past two years. The article submitted by a scientist explains that life inside China, including its major urban centers, “has been relatively normal since the end of the first wave in the spring of 2020. Businesses, such as restaurants, bars and movie theaters have been open throughout China.” For the most part, the population of China has not lived under the constant fear of being infected or infecting others.

One section of the essay, “Controlling an outbreak in 15 days,” deserves particularly careful study. Citing the case of an outbreak in the major metropolis of Chongqing (population 20 million), it explains how a policy of elimination (“Zero COVID”) was implemented in practice.

After experiencing no new infections for more than a year following the initial outbreak in the early months of 2020, the city responded rapidly when a 32-year-old man tested positive on November 1, 2021. The submission explains:

Within a day of first detection, the city of Chongqing closed off the headquarters of the energy company and other buildings which had been visited by the infected people. The districts of the city in which the infected individuals lived announced mass testing campaigns and gathered samples from 125,000 people within 24 hours.

The patients' apartment complexes were strictly locked down, with food and other vital supplies delivered regularly by city health workers. ... Various areas of the city were labeled “high risk zones,” with entry and exit strictly controlled. Throughout the city, mahjong parlors, movie theaters, libraries, museums and other

public places where large numbers of people come together were temporarily closed.

Authorities initiated a campaign of contact tracing (identifying who infected individuals might have interacted with, including through the use of smartphone-based apps). Those at risk of having been infected went into isolation, with safe housing provided by the state and food delivered on a regular basis. The total number of people in quarantine peaked at 1,300 one week after the initial cluster of infections was identified.

Because of the magnitude of the response, only a handful of people ever tested positive, all of whom had been quarantined on the first day. On November 17, with no new infections having been detected outside of quarantine for more than two weeks, the city announced that the outbreak had been controlled. Chongqing was officially declared a “low-risk zone.” Restrictions were relaxed, and life went back to normal.

It took 15 days to go from the first detected case until the official end of the outbreak.

This 15-day period was the only time that the 20 million residents of Chongqing had significant restrictions on their lives after the initial outbreak in early 2020.

The success of this strategy has depended on and received broad popular support and participation, along with a significant investment in social infrastructure and public health systems at the local and national levels. The author notes, for example, that cities with populations under five million are required to have the capacity to test *the entire population* in just two days, while cities with populations above five million must be able to test everyone in five days.

The “dynamic zero” policy of China is a confirmation in practice of the viability of a policy aimed at eliminating SARS-CoV-2. As the article explains, in the summer of 2020, the China Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) published an article in *The Lancet* medical journal, that laid out two basic strategies: “containment and suppression” (“dynamic zero,” or a policy of elimination) and “mitigation,” which in different forms is the policy pursued by all the major capitalist governments.

“Mitigation might allow development of herd immunity over a long time,” the China CDC wrote, “but at a great cost in terms of number of cases, morbidity, and mortality.”

As scientists have explained and the *World Socialist Web Site* has extensively documented, a “mitigation” strategy, which has over the past year focused on vaccination, is not by itself able to stop the pandemic. Indeed, the case of China demonstrates that public health

measures—lockdowns, isolation, contact tracing and mass testing—are even more critical than vaccination, as China was able to eliminate the virus, outside of isolated outbreaks, before any vaccine was available.

There is no question that the vast social experience of collective revolutionary struggle in China has left a profound imprint on the consciousness of masses of people, which has persisted despite the restoration of capitalism. There is enormous popular support for the Zero COVID policy, which expresses a level of social solidarity and consciousness that does not yet exist in the United States and Europe.

The Beijing regime simply could not ignore the expectation that appropriate measures would be taken to stop the pandemic. These measures are of a highly progressive character, but they are not specifically socialist. The measures that China has implemented are, in fact, based on long established principles and procedures of public health developed in the course of the late 19th and 20th centuries, albeit aided by the far more advanced technology made possible by the communication revolution.

Moreover, an elimination strategy, on a smaller scale, had been implemented in a handful of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam. Under intense pressure, above all, from Washington, these countries have largely reversed course, and China remains the “last Zero COVID holdout.” In the US, in an earlier period, aggressive public health measures contained infectious disease, as in the case of the 1947 outbreak of smallpox in New York City, which was stopped through mass contact tracing and vaccination.

The question that needs to be answered is not why such policies, clearly effective, were implemented in China, but why, despite the staggering toll in human lives, they have been rejected in the United States and Europe.

The explanation must come from the analysis of class interests. Measures to stop the pandemic and save lives have been rejected not because they were and are ineffective but because they conflict with the interests of the ruling elite. From the beginning, a conscious decision was made to prioritize the performance of the financial markets and corporate profits over saving lives.

The passage in the US of the CARES Act in late March 2020, on a nearly unanimous bipartisan basis, sanctioned the handout of trillions of dollars to Wall Street, a policy emulated in the other major capitalist countries. Once this was done, the ruling class turned to reopening everything, allowing the virus to spread without restraint.

What is more, one cannot ignore the fact that in the years leading up to the pandemic, the “problem” of high life expectancy and health care costs for the elderly was a topic of intense discussion within the ruling class.

The *New York Times* reported yesterday that 1 out of every 100 elderly Americans over the age of 65 has died from COVID-19. This is a staggering figure—one in 100, or 600,000 Americans over the age of 65. This means that millions of people have lost a parent, grandparent or spouse to the pandemic.

And this colossal social crime continues. The Omicron variant of COVID-19 is spreading rapidly throughout the world, yet the ruling class has made clear that no serious measures will be taken to stop it. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson acknowledged on Sunday that “a tidal wave of Omicron is coming” but proposed that nothing be done other than “get boosted now.” All businesses and schools are to remain open.

In the United States, which is currently in the midst of a surge of the Delta variant, President Biden has insisted that there will be “no lockdowns” in response to Omicron. More than 1,100 people are dying every day in the United States, and more people are killed each week than throughout the entire course of the pandemic in China.

More than 5.3 million people have died from COVID-19, according to official figures, while the real toll (“excess deaths”) is around 15 million. In the United States alone, the real death toll from the pandemic is over 1

million. If these deaths were preventable—and China demonstrates that they were—then one is speaking about a social crime of monumental proportions, indeed one of the greatest social crimes in modern history.

The experience of the past two years shows that there is no limit to the number of deaths that governments in the US, Europe and other major capitalist countries are willing to accept. The limit will be set not by the governments of the ruling class but by the independent organization and intervention of the working class.

The dilemma that China itself confronts is that the effort to maintain a Zero COVID policy in one country is, in the long term, unsustainable. Enormous pressure is being brought to bear by the major imperialist powers for China to abandon this policy. There are two motives behind this drive. First, China’s restrictions are seen as disruptive to US and European profit interests, inasmuch as China is a major center of production for the global capitalist market.

Even more important, however, are domestic political considerations. A common reaction that the WWSWS has received from the submission by the scientist is surprise at both the success of China’s Zero COVID policy and its broad popular support. The ruling class is fearful that China’s ability to eliminate the virus within its borders will encourage the growth of resistance in the international working class to the homicidal course upon which the financial oligarchy has embarked.

It is this that accounts for the increasingly hysterical tone of anti-Chinese propaganda in which accusations of “genocide” are being leveled against China, which has demonstrated a far greater concern for the health and lives of its citizens, including the Uighurs, than the US or European powers. This has supplemented the “Wuhan Lab” lie that China is itself responsible for the pandemic.

The whole point is to poison public opinion with lies and to discredit and block a real public discussion on the alternatives to the policy pursued in the major capitalist countries. This campaign will in turn intensify the pressure from business elites within China for a shift toward opening up the country to the virus, while any retreat from the Zero COVID policy will encounter enormous resistance in the Chinese working class.

The example of China demonstrates that the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a political question. The implementation of a strategy of *global elimination* requires a mass social movement of the working class, based on a repudiation of the economic interests that have been prioritized throughout the pandemic. This means, inescapably, a revolutionary struggle against the entire capitalist system.

Developing within the working class an understanding of what has happened, who is responsible and what must be done is critical. This is the aim of the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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