

# Governments refuse to take action as Omicron variant surges throughout the world

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The Omicron variant is spreading with extreme rapidity throughout the world and is likely to become the dominant variant in many countries by the end of the year. The variant has generated an enormous spike in cases in southern Africa, where it appears to have originated, as well as in the UK, Denmark, Norway and other European countries. It is already the dominant strain in London.

In the United States, where the official death toll from the pandemic has exceeded a staggering 800,000 over the past two years, new cases are up sharply in New York, New Hampshire, Connecticut and other states. In New York, Omicron already accounts for 13 percent of all cases, including a massive outbreak among fully vaccinated students at Cornell University in Ithaca, which has been forced to shut down in-person instruction.

The response of the major capitalist countries to the developing “tsunami”—essentially, nothing—displays a level of criminal irresponsibility that is staggering. What is known about the variant so far makes clear that urgent action is necessary.

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Tuesday that “Omicron is spreading at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant.” He condemned claims in the US and international media that the new variant is “mild” and therefore not dangerous, “We are concerned that people are dismissing Omicron as mild,” he said. “We underestimate this virus at our peril. Even if Omicron does cause less severe disease, the sheer number of cases could once again overwhelm unprepared health systems.”

Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, technical lead on COVID-19 at the WHO, echoed the Director-General’s comments and condemned the “vaccine-only”

approach to the pandemic taken by the US and other countries in the Americas and Europe. “I think we are facing a tsunami of infections in the world, both Delta and Omicron. ... Vaccination alone is not enough. Vaccination prevents serious illness and death but does not completely prevent infection.”

As scientists have persistently warned, even if the Omicron variant turns out to be somewhat less lethal—which is yet to be confirmed—the sheer scale of the cases means that hospitalizations and deaths will rise sharply and catastrophically.

In addition to being extremely infectious, the Omicron variant appears to have a more severe impact on children than previous strains.

South African Health Minister Joe Phaahla reported that 5 percent of children infected with the Omicron variant have been hospitalized, compared to just .05 percent of COVID-19 cases among children currently hospitalized in the United Kingdom.

Hospital admissions in Gauteng, South Africa, have surged 45 percent above the levels seen in the previous peak. In Tshwane, South Africa, the initial epicenter of the Omicron outbreak, more than 100 infants under two years old have been admitted to hospitals, the largest number of any age group.

The Omicron variant, moreover, is resistant to vaccines, with a new study released on Tuesday showing that all three vaccines authorized in the US (Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson) offer significantly less protection. The most recent data from South Africa found that two shots of the Pfizer vaccine provided only 33 efficacy against symptomatic infections and only 70 percent protection against hospitalization, substantial drops from all previous variants.

Given that only 5 percent of the world population has

received a booster and roughly 46 percent has received two doses, the vast majority of the world's population is now at risk of symptomatic infections and potential hospitalization from Omicron.

In the face of this disaster, governments continue to reject vital measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. There are “no plans” for further lockdowns, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Wednesday, echoing Biden's insistence that there will be “no lockdowns” in response to Omicron.

No restrictions are being placed on domestic travel for holiday gatherings, despite the known dangers of air travel. According to AAA, roughly 6.4 million people are expected to fly for the upcoming holidays, triple the number from last year. In the US, there are no requirements for passengers to be vaccinated and most will wear insufficiently effective surgical or cloth masks, creating the conditions for superspreader events and facilitating the exponential growth of Omicron cases.

The indifference to mass death on the part of the ruling classes was spelled out in an editorial by the *New York Times* published Friday, “Covid Isn't Going Anywhere. It's Time We Started Acting Like It.”

The *Times*, in line with the policies of the Biden administration, called for an end to the quarantining of children exposed to COVID-19. “It makes sense to allow workers and students to avoid confinement or test their way out of it much more quickly.” The *Times* condemned universal masking in schools, declaring, “No one wants to force young children to wear masks for several hours a day indefinitely.”

Instead of acting to prevent the Omicron surge, the Biden administration declared its opposition to the closure of schools and nonessential businesses, declaring its plan “doesn't include shutdowns or lockdowns but widespread vaccinations and boosters.”

The emergence of the Omicron variant has itself exposed the failure of the “vaccine-only” strategy to stop the pandemic, and the massive surge of cases throughout the world has totally discredited the claims that the Omicron variant requires no change in policy.

And Omicron is not the end. The rapid evolution and high transmissibility of the latest “variant of concern” means that the next will likely evolve even more quickly. So long as the virus continues to propagate, there will be a continuous threat of the emergence of

new, more virulent, vaccine-resistant and potentially deadly strains.

The situation is getting worse by the day, and a new strategy is necessary! As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on December 4,

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.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties affiliated with the International Committee of the Fourth International have initiated the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Inquest will examine and refute all the lies promoted by governments and in the media over the past two years, an essential part of developing within the working class an understanding of what has happened and what must be done.

The Inquest must be connected to the organization and mobilization of the international working class as an independent force, through the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighborhood. A change in policy will not be realized outside of a massive social and political movement to demand a strategy of global elimination and eradication.



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