

Biden administration doubles down on “vaccine-only” strategy as Omicron emerges as dominant strain in US

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The Omicron variant of COVID-19 is now the dominant strain in the US, according to a statement by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) yesterday. Omicron accounts for 73 percent of new infections, a staggering six-fold increase in only one week. In some parts of the country, including New York City, the variant already accounts for more than 90 percent of new cases.

Amidst this massive surge in cases, US President Joe Biden is going on national television today to outline the administration’s response. His message will be clear: There will be no measures, outside of vaccination, to stop the spread of the virus.

The principal preoccupation in the White House right now is the potential impact of the Omicron surge on Wall Street share values. On Monday, the major indices fell by about 1.2 percent, on concerns that the spread of infections throughout Europe and the United States will compel lockdowns, hamper travel and put a dent in Christmas shopping. Two weeks after insisting that there will be “no lockdowns” in response to Omicron, Biden’s task is to reassure the corporate and financial oligarchy that there will be no shift in policy.

“We are intent on not letting Omicron disrupt work and school for the vaccinated,” stated White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients last Friday, in a preview of Biden’s remarks. “For the unvaccinated, you’re looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm.”

A report in CNN on Saturday recounted discussions among administration officials on the necessity “to begin discussing publicly how to live alongside a virus that shows no signs of disappearing, a potentially stark shift in messaging for a White House that once touted ‘freedom from the virus.’”

“We’re getting to the point now where … it’s about severity,” said Xavier Becerra, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, in a meeting with reporters last week. “It’s not about cases. It’s about severity.”

Becerra’s statement is a declaration that there will no longer be any pretense of ending the pandemic. What has been the de facto policy of the ruling class—that COVID-19 must be

allowed to become endemic—is now being openly proclaimed. The aim of official policy is not to prevent infection but to promote vaccination on the grounds that it will make infections less severe.

There are a series of blatant lies and misinformation in this “messaging.”

First, there is no basis to the claim that the infection of individuals who are vaccinated will be “mild.” Initial data indicates, at best, that existing vaccines will help in reducing the percentage of those infected who are hospitalized and die. However, the sheer scale of infections from Omicron will mean a massive surge in severe illness, including among the vaccinated.

Every infection carries the risk of disastrous consequences. A study published last week in the *Journal of American Medicine* (JAMA) found that 15 percent of hospital admissions are “breakthrough” cases (of those who have been vaccinated), and this is before the emergence of the Omicron variant, which is more resistant to vaccines. A separate study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, also published last week, reported that 69 percent of breakthrough cases are among people aged 65 and older, again before the emergence of the Omicron variant.

A staggering 1 out of every 100 Americans over the age of 65, or approximately 600,000 people, have died of COVID-19 over the past two years in what amounts to a war against the elderly. The uncontrolled spread of the Omicron variant means that countless thousands more will suffer debilitating illness and death. The data that does exist, moreover, indicates that cases of Long COVID—with prolonged symptoms and cognitive impacts—are just as common in those with “less severe” cases, including in breakthrough cases among vaccinated people.

Second, among the most alarming aspects of the Omicron variant is the surge in hospitalizations in both South Africa and the UK of infants, for whom there is no available vaccine. Infant hospitalizations in the UK, where the new variant has been spreading for weeks, increased by 39 percent last week, to 196, the highest level since the pandemic began.

As of December 5, only 16.7 percent of children in the United States between the ages of 5 and 11 had received at least one

dose of the vaccine, and no infants under the age of 5 are vaccinated.

The CDC reported last week that *at least 1,000 children under 18 have died from COVID-19*, including 319 infants under the age of 5. Half of these deaths have occurred within the last four months—the product of the criminally reckless reopening of schools to in-person learning. And this is prior to the impact of the Omicron variant.

Zients' declaration that the unvaccinated face "a winter of severe illness and death" is a statement that unvaccinated young children and infants will be hospitalized and killed in record numbers. Children, moreover, are not only potential victims of the virus but also vectors of transmission to their parents, teachers and the community as a whole.

Third, the ability of the Omicron variant to evade vaccines means that to be "fully vaccinated" requires that one have a third shot, or a booster. Vaccine effectiveness with just two shots is insufficient to protect against infection from Omicron, particularly if the second dose was administered more than six months ago.

However, only 18 percent of the US population have been boosted. Even if the number of people who are boosted rises in the coming days, it takes several weeks for the booster to increase immunity, and millions of people will be infected with the Omicron variant before this happens.

Fourth, the callous indifference to the lives of millions of people in the United States who are not fully vaccinated (about 27 percent of the population over the age of 18) is aimed at blaming individual negligence for the spread of COVID-19 and deflecting responsibility from the ruling class and its political institutions.

Why is it that a substantial portion of the population in the US is unvaccinated, or not fully vaccinated? One cannot believe that millions of adults want to die or want their children to die because they have not received a vaccine.

The fact is that for two years, the population has been subject to an unrelenting campaign of misinformation and propaganda. The severity of the pandemic has been continuously misrepresented in the media, replaced with happy talk about "light at the end of the tunnel." Only five months ago, Biden proclaimed that the US was declaring its "independence" from the virus, and that the population could go back to life as normal.

Moreover, a significant faction of the ruling class—led the Trump and the fascistic right—has promoted from the beginning a policy of mass infection or "herd immunity," opposing even the most inadequate mitigation measures, such as mask mandates. "Vaccine skepticism" and hostility to the wearing of masks have been deliberately promoted, feeding on the consequences of the prolonged campaign of the ruling elites to promote backwardness, anti-scientific conceptions and noxious individualism.

Finally, the emergence of the Omicron variant itself is a

devastating exposure of the "vaccine-only" strategy. The evolution of a more transmissible and vaccine-resistant variant is the outcome of the decision not to stop the spread of the virus through aggressive public health measures, coordinated on a global scale.

Scientists, as well as the *World Socialist Web Site*, have warned for months that exclusive reliance on the vaccine alone would inevitably produce precisely such a catastrophe. And Omicron will not be the last variant of COVID-19. So long as the virus is allowed to spread, there will be the constant danger of the evolution of new, more dangerous strains.

The ruling class is well aware that the statements they are making and the activities they are encouraging will lead to mass infection and death. The fact that officials in the city of New York, currently an epicenter for the spread of Omicron in the US, are even talking about whether to hold a massive New Year's celebration in Times Square this year exemplifies the criminal level of irresponsibility and recklessness that pervades the entire political establishment.

The policies necessary to stop the pandemic and eliminate the virus are also understood. It requires the shutdown of nonessential production and in-person learning, mass testing and contact tracing, in addition to universal vaccination and other mitigation measures. This policy has been implemented successfully in China, where the number of deaths from the beginning of the pandemic has been limited to less than 5,000, and the population has, for most of the past two years, been able to live normal lives.

An elimination strategy has been rejected in all the major capitalist countries, however, for one reason: The necessary measures would undermine the interests of the ruling class and threaten to implode the massive speculative bubble on Wall Street and other financial markets, fueled by unlimited sums of money from the Federal Reserve and central banks.

As the United States and the world enter the third year of the pandemic, facing a massive surge in cases produced by the Omicron variant, it is clearer than ever that the fight against the pandemic is not simply a medical issue. It requires the development of a mass social and political movement, rooted in the working class, to demand and enforce the emergency measures to stop the pandemic once and for all.

The fight for a policy of global elimination and eradication, necessary to save countless thousands of lives, is of necessity at the same time a fight against the ruling class and the entire capitalist system.



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