Wall Street millionaire Jeff Zients directs Biden's policy of mass death

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At least 463,000 Americans have now died from COVID-19 under the Biden administration, more than under Trump, and over 48 million people have been infected with the virus also under Biden. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1,150 children have succumbed to the virus in the US, the vast majority over the past year as this administration has ruthlessly demanded fully in-person classes at all schools.

The ongoing surge of the highly infectious Omicron variant has officially infected nearly 23 million Americans since December 15, including over 3.2 million children. COVID-19 hospitalizations are now at record levels, with over 21,000 people hospitalized with the virus every day despite the wide availability of vaccines. Over the past week, the country averaged over 2,000 deaths per day.

At a press conference on January 19, only his second since becoming president, Biden refused to acknowledge this horrific reality or the untold number of deaths to come from the Omicron surge. Instead, he absurdly claimed that "remarkable progress" has been made on the pandemic and that the US is now in a "better place."

Over the past two months, since the World Health Organization (WHO) designated Omicron a "variant of concern," a pronounced shift has taken place in the response of the Biden administration to the pandemic. With the full backing of the corporate media, all pretense of seeking to minimize infections or even stop the pandemic through mitigation measures has been dropped, with a de facto adoption of the eugenicist "herd immunity" strategy based on letting the virus rip through society unchecked.

Alongside Biden, the most powerful figure responsible for this shift and the overall US response to the pandemic is Jeff Zients, the White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator and Counselor to the President. Rarely appearing on national television or quoted in the print media, he is perhaps the least known person whose actions have devastated millions of working class and middle class families throughout the US and internationally during the pandemic.

Despite being vested with the power to use the Defense Production Act, previously reserved only for the president, until the past month Zients has refused to provide the American population with free rapid tests, high quality masks and other tools to fight the pandemic. Instead, he has allowed the market to determine supply and prices, until finally agreeing in recent weeks to distribute a very limited number of masks and rapid tests, most of which will not arrive until after the peak of the Omicron surge.

Zients was appointed by Biden to head the COVID Response Team despite having no background in medicine or public health. He is a finance capitalist and a pandemic profiteer, directly benefitting from the CARES Act bailout that inflated the value of his investment funds and stock shares. Zients's personal wealth grew by between $10.4 million and $28 million in 2020 alone, and he has the largest net worth of any Biden administration official, estimated to be between $89.3 million and $442.8 million in assets, including investment funds, real estate properties and cash shares.

He represents the nexus between the corporate-financial elite and the "top scientists," including CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky and Dr. Anthony Fauci. Throughout the past year, Zients has been the most vocal opponent of lockdown measures and has played a key role in the lifting of mask mandates, anti-scientific policies which are provided a veneer of legitimacy by Drs. Walensky and Fauci.

In order to understand the catastrophic response of the Biden administration to the pandemic, it is necessary to examine the background and political career of the man quietly operating at the center of this response.

Jeffrey Zients: A product of Bain & Company and the Obama administration

After graduating from Duke University in 1988, Zients began his career at the management consulting firm Bain & Company, which was founded in 1973 by William Bain. Throughout his career, Zients has worked in this type of vulture capitalist milieu.

In 1984, Bain founded Bain Capital with Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential candidate, who like Zients started his career at Bain & Company. Bain Capital is a private equity firm that uses leveraged buyouts to acquire companies, then either saddles them with debt and lets them go bankrupt or guts them, destroying thousands of jobs while generating billions in profits for shareholders.

In the 1990s, Zients was appointed the chief operating officer (1996–1998), chief executive officer (1998–2000), and chairman (2001–2004) of the Advisory Board Company, as well as chairman of a second company, the Corporate Executive Board, from 2000–2001. These consulting firms, founded by Zients's mentor David G. Bradley, primarily advise health care corporations and educational institutions on how to cut costs and boost profits. Bradley and Zients both became multimillionaires upon taking the companies through initial public offerings, with Zients's fortune then estimated to be $132 million.

Zients donated generously to the 2008 Democratic presidential campaigns of candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Despite having no prior experience in government, Obama appointed Zients to the newly created position of Chief Performance Officer, set up to "cut bureaucracy," as well as Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget for Management (OMB).

He soon became acting director of the OMB and took part in the Obama administration's attacks on federal workers in 2010-11, imposing a pay freeze on 2.1 million federal workers and slashing Medicare and Social Security spending in the FY2014 budget.

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In October 2013, Zients was brought in to try to mend the disastrous rollout of the healthcare.gov website, a cornerstone of the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act (ACA). The ACA was concocted by and for insurance companies and corporate America to slash costs and increase profits, while drastically reducing available health benefits to workers. While overseeing this operation, Zients maintained an ownership position in PSA Healthcare, which the White House dubiously claimed was not a conflict of interest.

From 2014-17, Zients was the director of the National Economic Council (NEC), where he acted as "a kind of ambassador to the business community," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. In this role, he earned the praise of corporate and financial lobbying groups.

According to the paper *All the President's Friends: Political Access and Firm Value* by Jeffrey R. Brown and Jiekun Huang, there were "2,286 meetings between corporate executives and federal government officials at the White House during the period from January 2009 through December 2015." Of these visits, Zients had the second most at 103, slightly more than Obama himself.

Like numerous Obama administration officials, upon the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Zients returned to the world of finance capital. He became CEO of the private investment holding company Cranemere Group in 2017 which, in the words of the *Washington Post,* aimed to be "another Berkshire Hathaway—Warren Buffett's $500 billion colossus." As Cranemere's CEO, Zients netted a combined salary and bonus of $1.6 million.

In 2018, he joined the board of directors at Facebook and chaired the Audit and Risk Oversight Committee. He left the board in 2020 and was paid at least $100,000 in cash and roughly $300,000 worth of Facebook stock in those two years.

In November 2019, Zients hosted a fundraiser for Biden at his home, inviting more than 30 former high-ranking Obama administration officials. In summer 2020, he hired the media consulting firm Saguaro Strategies to scrub his Wikipedia page of the most damaging content as he became more involved with Biden's campaign.

In October 2020, he was named to Biden's transition team, and on December 7, 2020, he was announced as the presumptive appointment to be Coronavirus Response Coordinator and Counselor to the President.

The disastrous first year of the Biden-Zients pandemic response

Much as Obama's appointment of Timothy Geithner as Treasury Secretary in 2009 signaled to the financial elite that their criminal role in the 2008 financial collapse would be covered up, the appointment of Zients as Coronavirus Response Coordinator indicated to this same oligarchy that their interests would continue to take precedence over public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. If anything, his appointment was even more brazen than Geithner's, as his only experience with health care was overseeing financial and consulting firms that have profited off the gutting of medical services.

Following his election in November 2020, Biden announced a COVID-19 Advisory Board composed primarily of members with medical backgrounds, aimed at giving the public the false impression that he would mount a substantial federal response to the pandemic opposite that of the Trump administration. Biden's posturing that he would "follow the science" on COVID-19 was the greatest factor behind his election, with NPR noting at the time, "Many of the voters who helped propel Biden toward the presidency ranked the pandemic as the most important issue facing the United States."

Behind the scenes, however, plans were laid to ensure that "nothing would fundamentally change," as Biden secretly told his wealthy donors at a 2019 fundraising soirée .

Upon Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021, the COVID-19 Advisory Board was quickly dissolved, with Biden declaring two days later, "There is nothing we can do to change the trajectory of the pandemic in the next several months." The Board was replaced by the White House COVID-19 Response Team, with Zients at the helm and the majority of other appointees also having no medical background.

In April 2021, Dr. Anthony Fauci described Zients's role to the McClatchy DC Bureau, saying, "You generally have Jeff there as the coach or the conductor of this orchestra of people."

As "conductor," Zients has exerted immense control over information on the pandemic and the administration's overall response. On February 3, 2021, Bloomberg noted, "Zients and [his deputy Natalie] Quillian often keep such a tight hold on information that health experts who brief the president don't always have the latest on data or efforts, according to three people familiar with the internal discussions."

Alongside Biden's Chief of Staff Ron Klain, Zients has had closer access to the Oval Office than any other figure in the administration. He has been privy to all top-level discussions on the removal of COVID-19 safety restrictions by the CDC, ranging from the lifting of mask mandates to the recent reduction of isolation and quarantine guidelines which took place after lobbying from Delta Air Lines.

There is evidence indicating that Zients has actively intervened to remove safety measures. Two days after CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky abruptly announced on May 13, 2021 that vaccinated people could stop wearing masks, the *Washington Post* reported that in the weeks leading up to this disastrous policy change Zients had been "regularly quizzing health officials on when vaccinated Americans could safely take off their masks."

Given his central role in the pandemic response, it is likely that Zients pressured the CDC to enact this unscientific measure, which quickly prompted almost every state to drop mask mandates. Many leading scientists in the CDC and other health agencies were shocked by the decision, having not been consulted in advance.

In November 2021, evidence emerged that Zients played a direct role in encouraging Vermont's Republican Governor Phil Scott to not reinstate a statewide mask mandate, despite the fact that the Delta variant was causing a record surge of infections in the state. On November 23, Vermont Public Radio host Jane Lindholm tweeted, "Scott references White House communications chief and White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zientz (sic), who have been quoted as saying they don't think broad mandates are necessary. Says his position is in line with the White House."

Every Tuesday, Zients holds calls with state governors, most of whom have similarly refused to reimplement mask mandates, even during the ongoing Omicron surge that has pushed cases and hospitalizations to record levels. Not only are these policies unscientific, but they are also unpopular, with recent polls finding that the majority of Americans support mask mandates.

Zients is chiefly responsible for the Biden administration's vaccine-only approach, which he has advocated continuously over the past year. During this time, the US has provided the bare minimum of vaccine doses internationally and has refused to nullify the intellectual property rights of the US-based Pfizer and Moderna pharmaceutical companies, despite the fact that the Moderna vaccine was developed with direct funding from the US government.

Fundamentally, Zients and the Biden administration have not "followed the science" but rather "followed the money." They have made no effort whatsoever to popularize or even explain the science of airborne transmission, which was understood and highlighted by leading aerosol scientists as early as March 2020. Among the most basic reasons for this

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is that doing so would place the onus on corporations and the government to ensure that all indoor spaces are renovated with high quality filtration and ventilation systems, which is seen as too costly.

From the day of Biden's inauguration, both he and Zients could have utilized the powers of the Defense Production Act to compel corporations to provide ample resources to protect the population, while guaranteeing financial support for all workers and small business people during temporary lockdowns. Instead, the exact opposite policies have been pursued, and lockdowns have been totally ruled out because they threaten a collapse of the stock market and impinge on the ability of the corporations to generate profits.

On December 15, at the beginning of the Omicron surge in the US, Zients stated, "We're in a very different and stronger place than we were a year ago. And there's no need to lock down." He added, "We know how to keep our kids in school and our businesses open, and we're not going to shut down our economy in any way. We're going to keep our schools and our businesses open."

Two days later, Zients reiterated this anti-lockdown stance, stating, "We are intent on not letting Omicron disrupt work and school for the vaccinated." He menacingly threatened the unvaccinated, saying, "you're looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm."

At a press conference last Friday, a day when 801,343 Americans were officially infected with COVID-19 and 2,858 died from the virus, Zients downplayed the pandemic, stating that the US is "moving toward a time when COVID won't disrupt our daily lives, where COVID won't be a constant crisis." He falsely claimed, "President Biden and his administration have acted aggressively to follow the science," adding, "we have the tools to make sure that we are able to continue to operate businesses, to keep our schools open, just as we've done through this surge in cases."

What political conclusions must be drawn?

Among scientists, anti-COVID activists and those who closely follow the pandemic, there is growing awareness of Zients's role and calls for him to be fired and replaced with an expert in public health. The anger and frustration animating these calls is fully warranted; Zients is a criminal and deserves prosecution for his role in the Biden administration's homicidal response to the pandemic.

However, Zients's actions are reflective not just of his own depravity and indifference to human life but the character of the Democratic Party and the social strata—sections of the upper middle class and the financial oligarchy—upon which it is based. Far more is necessary than merely removing Zients from his position of power.

The experience of the past year and the fact that a figure such as Zients could remain head of the US pandemic response—despite overseeing more than 463,000 deaths—makes abundantly clear that the Democrats are in thrall to Wall Street and impervious to the needs of the working class. All the claims made by Bernie Sanders and other members of the pseudo-left that a Biden administration would be progressive and the Democrats could be pushed to the left have been totally blown apart. Appeals to the ruling class will continue to fall on deaf ears.

The fight to end the pandemic requires the development of a mass movement in the working class, consciously fighting to eliminate COVID-19 on a world scale. In consultation with leading scientists, the *World Socialist Web Site* has stressed that this could be achieved through the simultaneous deployment of all available public health measures, including temporary paid lockdowns, mass testing, systematic contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients and quarantining of exposed people, a globally coordinated free vaccination program and more.

This strategy of global elimination requires a frontal assault on the financial oligarchy and the profit system worldwide. According to this year's Oxfam report, titled "Inequality Kills," the world's 10 richest men have doubled their fortunes, while the incomes of the bottom 99 percent of society fell and millions were killed by COVID-19. In the US alone, the billionaires increased their wealth by over $2.21 trillion through October 2021.

The naked subordination of public health to private wealth throughout the pandemic, embodied in the decision by Biden to put a Wall Street multimillionaire in charge of his White House COVID team, has radicalized masses of workers and youth all over the world who are increasingly entering into struggle to stop the pandemic. The critical task is to develop a revolutionary socialist leadership within the working class to educate and guide this emerging mass movement in order to carry out the socialist reorganization of society.

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