

The collapse of the “mitigation” strategy exposes the class issues in the fight against the pandemic

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Next month will mark two years since the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This grim milestone approaches as the spread of the Omicron variant has propelled a sharp rise in infections, hospitalizations and deaths throughout the world.

In just the first six weeks of 2022, there have been more than 100 million reported cases of COVID-19 globally, nearly half the number of reported cases in all of 2021. More than 350,000 people have died. If this rate continues through the remainder of the year, more than 3 million people will die from the coronavirus in 2022, compared to 2.5 million in 2021 and just over 2 million in 2020. And this is according to official figures, which far understate the reality of infections and deaths.

In the United States, which remains the epicenter of the pandemic, more than 2,600 people are dying every day, according to the BNO tracker’s 7-day average, a level that is higher than all but a few weeks during the winter of 2020-2021. Hospitals throughout much of the country remain overwhelmed. While daily reported cases have fallen from their Omicron peak in mid-January, they are still higher than at any other point since January 2021.

The state of the pandemic in its third year raises critical questions of perspective in combatting the virus.

Six months ago, in August of 2021, prior to the emergence of the Omicron variant, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a statement outlining the three basic strategies that have been advanced in response to the coronavirus pandemic: “herd immunity,” mitigation and elimination-eradication.

The first strategy, “herd immunity,” we explained, is “the bogus claim that the rapid spread of the virus among the younger and hardier sections of the population will create a human shield around the most vulnerable.” According to the proponents of “herd immunity,” infection is to be encouraged, as it creates immunity in the population and will eventually bring the virus under control.

This program of deliberate mass infection was implemented most aggressively in the US under the Donald Trump, in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and in the UK under Boris Johnson. The catastrophic loss of life over the past two years in these countries—led by the US, with more than 900,000 dead—has exposed the “herd immunity” strategy as a homicidal and criminally insane policy of mass death.

The second strategy, “mitigation,” we wrote, proposes “an amorphous collection of measures that tries to negotiate between the realities of the virus and the financial interests of the ruling elites.” The mitigationists argued that the virus can be contained and the

pandemic brought to an end through masking, social distancing, testing, vaccination and other measures. As one variant of the mitigation strategy, the statement pointed to the Biden administration’s claim that the pandemic could be ended through vaccination and masking alone.

The emergence of the Omicron variant, however, has been used by the political establishment of all the major capitalist countries to justify abandoning any pretense of a policy even of mitigation. This has been done under the pretext that Omicron is “mild,” that the infection of tens of millions of people is increasing population immunity and, most recently, that it has led to a situation where COVID-19 is “endemic”—a term that is used widely without any scientific basis.

In Sweden, the home of the “herd immunity” strategy (“Swedish Model”), the few remaining pandemic restrictions were scrapped on Wednesday, and even most testing for COVID-19 has been ended. On the same day, the UK government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that laws requiring infected individuals to self-isolate will likely be lifted by the end of this month.

The government of Denmark announced earlier this month that it was no longer treating COVID-19 as a “societally critical” disease, despite the fact that, driven by the more dangerous strain of Omicron, BA.2, new cases in Denmark are far above their previous records, and average daily deaths are rapidly approaching the peak from early 2021. Italy and Spain are ending outdoor mask mandates, and Switzerland is removing vaccine requirements as soon as next week.

In the United States, Democratic state governors, under the guidance of the Biden administration, are ending mask requirements in schools and other regulations, bringing their policy into line with what has already been in place in most Republican-controlled states. California’s Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said Wednesday that the state will transition to an “endemic” strategy, by which he means that COVID-19 will now be treated like the common cold or flu.

As a component part of ending restrictions, the US and other countries are moving toward ending or undermining reporting mechanisms that allow for an accurate tracking of cases and deaths.

To justify a position that no further measures are required to contain viral transmission, the corporate media now regularly publishes articles asserting that COVID-19 has become “endemic.” Such assertions have absolutely nothing to do with scientific fact, let alone public health.

Writing in *Nature* magazine last month, infectious disease expert

Aris Katzourakis, a professor of zoology at Oxford University, noted that “the word ‘endemic’ has become one of the most misused of the pandemic.” Not only is an endemic infection one in which overall case rates are static and predictable—which is clearly not the case with COVID-19—determining that a virus is endemic has nothing to do with declaring that the danger has passed.

“A disease can be endemic and both widespread and deadly,” Katzourakis wrote. “Malaria [which is considered endemic] killed more than 600,000 people in 2020. Ten million fell ill with tuberculosis that same year and 1.5 million died. Endemic certainly does not mean that evolution has somehow tamed a pathogen so that life simply returns to ‘normal.’”

The proponents of the “let it rip,” “new normal” and “endemic” strategy ignore certain basic facts: that the global death toll is close to its highest level on record and rising sharply; that while Omicron may be less severe for many of those who are vaccinated, it is still a serious and deadly illness, particularly for the elderly and immunocompromised; that much of the world’s population is still unvaccinated, including most children; and that, so long as viral transmission continues, there is a perpetual evolutionary pressure for the emergence of new, more virulent and vaccine-resistant variants.

Underscoring the latter point, the World Health Organization’s chief scientist, Soumya Swaminathan, warned yesterday: “We have seen the virus evolve, mutate ... so we know there will be more variants, more variants of concern, so we are not at the end of the pandemic.”

Finally, none of the new proponents of mass infection acknowledge the still little understood long-term consequences of contracting the virus. A report in *Science* this week found that individuals infected with COVID-19—even if they were not hospitalized—had, *one year later*, a substantially increased risk of heart and vessel maladies, including heart attacks, strokes and cardiac arrest. Eric Topol, a cardiologist at Scripps Research, called the findings “stunning. ... If anybody ever thought that COVID was like the flu this should be one of the most powerful data sets to point out it’s not.”

How many additional people will die from heart disease and other consequences of Long COVID over the coming years when millions of people are contracting the virus every single day?

There is little historical precedent for such a situation. In the face of mass infection and death, the representatives of all the major capitalist countries are simply declaring: “Enough! This is the ‘new normal.’ Accept it. Get back to work, get back to school, and stop complaining.”

The open and unabashed embrace of mass infection by all the major governments has no doubt shocked many principled scientists and epidemiologists, including those who advocated for strong mitigation measures.

The basic fallacy in their approach has been to treat the pandemic primarily as a medical issue. The collapse of the mitigation strategy, however, exposes in the most direct way that the fight against the pandemic is a class question, which can be resolved only through the methods of social struggle.

The catastrophic pandemic policy throughout the past two years has not been the product of mistakes. The pandemic was used by the ruling class to hand out trillions of dollars to the markets, all of which must be paid for through the exploitation of workers who have to be back on the job. The necessary measures that could and still can be implemented to stop the pandemic have been rejected because they cut across this social and economic imperative.

Explaining the bankruptcy of the mitigationist policy, the WSWS

wrote last August:

Mitigation is to epidemiology what reformism is to capitalist politics. Just as the reformist harbors the hope that gradual and piecemeal reforms will, over time, lessen and ameliorate the evils of the profit system, the mitigationists nourish the delusion that COVID-19 will eventually evolve into something no more harmful than the common cold. This is a pipe dream totally divorced from the science of the pandemic.

As it is impossible to “negotiate with the virus,” so it is impossible to “negotiate” with the ruling class. On the part of the Biden administration, the pretense of attempting to “reform” the pandemic through mitigationist measures has collapsed along with the pretense that it would implement a policy of social reform in general. Its effective embrace of “herd immunity” is of a piece with its program of war and reaction. They are different expressions of the same class interests—the interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

As the WSWS has insisted, the alternative to “herd immunity” is not mitigation but elimination-eradication, which, we explained in August, “entails the universal deployment of every weapon in the arsenal of measures to combat COVID-19, coordinated on a global scale, to stamp out the virus once and for all.” Mitigation measures are necessary, but the pandemic can be brought to an end only to the extent that they are combined with a broader global strategy aimed at eliminating the virus.

All claims that such a policy is impossible and unviable are refuted both by historical experience—including the successful eradication of smallpox—and the example of China. China, the most populous country in the world, has shown that it is possible to contain COVID-19 through a Zero COVID policy, utilizing the methods that have long been employed as part of basic public health policy.

The implementation of a strategy of global elimination, however, must be rooted in the working class. The experience of the past two years has produced an enormous wellspring of social anger among millions of workers throughout the world. This is now intersecting with growing opposition to inequality, exploitation and the massive social and economic dislocation that has been produced by the ruling class’s response to the pandemic.

In the third year of the pandemic, the fight for the global elimination of COVID-19 must be connected to a mass social, political and revolutionary movement of the working class, which has as its aim the complete restructuring of social and economic life. At its most fundamental level, the pandemic has exposed the bankruptcy of capitalism and, therefore, the necessity for socialism.



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