

China mounts all-out effort to stop the spread of Omicron BA.2 subvariant

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Over the past week, COVID-19 infections have reached record levels in China due to the penetration of the highly infectious and immune-resistant Omicron BA.2 subvariant, which has evolved as a result of the refusal by nearly every government to stop the pandemic. Backed by popular support for the “dynamic zero” policy that aims to continuously keep COVID-19 infections at zero, the Chinese government is mobilizing vast resources to quell the outbreak and save lives.

China’s National Health Commission reported 5,154 new COVID-19 cases Monday, of which 1,647 were asymptomatic. From March 1-14, over 15,000 domestically transmitted cases have been identified, affecting 28 provincial-level regions. The surge of infections began in early March in multiple provinces. It is centered in Jilin province in the northeast, where over 90 percent of all cases in the current outbreak have been identified.

On March 6, a day when 526 new cases were reported, officials deemed the situation “severe” and urged residents to use caution. On Monday, when Jilin reported 4,067 new cases, local officials warned that the situation remains “severe and complicated,” while vowing to stop transmission within a week if possible.

China is deploying nearly every available public health measure, including mass testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of all infected patients and the quarantining of those who came into contact with infected patients. Over 88 percent of the country’s population has received two doses of vaccine, the sixth highest rate in the world, and the government has ample supplies of monoclonal antibodies and other treatments.

As took place in January 2020 in response to the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, within days of this month’s outbreak five makeshift hospitals were built in Changchun and Jilin, with a combined capacity of 22,880 beds. A 6,000-bed isolation center will be constructed by the end of this week. In addition, five provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities have sent medical teams and resources to Jilin.

Hundreds of millions of COVID-19 tests will be administered throughout the country in the coming weeks. In the southeastern metropolis Shenzhen, each of the 17.6 million residents will be tested three times this week. In Jilin, 12 million at-home rapid antigen tests are being distributed to residents, all of whom will also be given multiple PCR tests.

Every symptomatic COVID-19 patient will receive hospital care, while those with asymptomatic infections will stay at safe isolation centers. All close contacts will quarantine and test themselves daily at home for five days in addition to having regular PCR tests.

Most critically, the government has implemented partial or complete lockdowns in each city where infections are highest, including all of Jilin province, as well as the metropolises of Shenzhen, Langfang, Dongguan, Shanghai, Xian and other small- to medium-size cities. It is estimated that more than 50 million people are under strict stay-at-home orders and nearly 40 million more are under partial lockdown.

These lockdowns, decried by the corporate media because they pause the production of profits, entail the temporary closure of nonessential workplaces and schools to stem viral transmission as quickly as possible. In Jilin and other cities, only essential workplaces remain open, including supermarkets, pharmacies, water, gas, sanitation and communications companies, and suppliers of essential goods.

Most of the Chinese population supports these necessary public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. The initial lockdowns of January-March 2020 were highly chaotic due to the novelty of the situation, but nearly two years after the end of the lockdown of Wuhan, the process has become more streamlined and widely accepted.

A forecasting model run by Lanzhou University in China’s northwest predicts that if all these measures are maintained, the outbreak will be fully contained by early April after an estimated 35,000 people test positive for the disease. So far, no one has died in the latest outbreak. China

has recorded only two COVID-19 deaths since May 16, 2020, compared to nearly 20 million excess deaths attributable to the pandemic outside of China over the past two years.

The aggressive pursuit of Zero-COVID on mainland China is influenced by the disastrous response of the local government in Hong Kong, a city and special administrative region of China, which has refused to implement lockdowns since BA.2 caused a major surge of infections and hospitalizations in mid-February. Daily death rates have skyrocketed and currently stand at a world record 37.68 per million people, in large part due to low vaccination rates among the elderly. While China's elderly population is slightly more vaccinated, roughly half of those above 80 years old are unvaccinated.

It remains to be seen whether China will successfully eliminate the virus once again, but the rapid and comprehensive response indicates that this will likely happen despite the uniquely dangerous characteristics of the BA.2 subvariant. If successful, this would again prove that the massive spread of disease and death beyond the borders of China was not inevitable.

The very fact that China has had to repeatedly eliminate the virus and faces the constant threat of the reintroduction of COVID-19 from abroad testifies to the criminal character of the response to the pandemic in the advanced capitalist countries, above all in the United States and the European Union.

By refusing to implement the elimination strategy pioneered in China and replicated by many other Asia-Pacific countries in 2020, the capitalist elites and their political representatives are responsible for the mutation of SARS-CoV-2 into ever more infectious and immune-evading variants, from Alpha to Omicron and whatever comes next. Their promotion of vaccine nationalism and upholding of intellectual property rights have left 86 percent of people in low-income countries totally unvaccinated.

Since the start of the Omicron surge in late November, nearly every country outside of China has surrendered to the pandemic and lifted all mitigation measures to slow the spread of the virus. Testing, contact tracing, data collection and reporting, isolation guidelines, and even the most basic masking protocols have all been curtailed. Falsely claiming that COVID-19 is now "endemic," the ruling elites are enforcing a brutal "new normal" of unending mass infection, long-term debilitation and death.

As a result, cases are rising exponentially across Europe, including in Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland and other countries, with hospitalizations again rising in the UK.

In the United States, BNO News reported 52,694 official

new cases and 1,478 new deaths Monday, nearly one half of China's cumulative cases and one third of China's cumulative deaths since the start of the pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) quietly noted that BA.2 now accounts for 23.1 percent of all sequenced infections, a percentage that is nearly doubling each week. Wastewater surveillance between February 24 and March 10 showed that 37 percent of reporting counties experienced an increase of 100 percent or more in the presence of viral RNA in their wastewater, while 15 percent of all sites reported a more than 1,000 percent increase.

The fundamental limitation of China's Zero-COVID policy is its national character. As long as COVID-19 continues to spread globally, it remains possible for new variants to evolve that are more infectious, immune-resistant and virulent. Without an international strategy, the policy of Zero COVID will be continuously undermined.

To paraphrase the great Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky, the elimination of COVID-19 within national limits is unthinkable. The ending of the pandemic begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena.

The deepening crisis of the pandemic intersects with a mounting geopolitical crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This desperate response of the Putin regime to the decades-long eastward expansion of NATO and drive by US imperialism to maintain its hegemony through the encirclement of Russia and China has profoundly destabilized an already fractured world order. Both crises, the war and the pandemic, are fueling the rise of inflation and economic instability, which in turn are provoking the growth of the class struggle internationally.

The only path forward to resolve the crisis of world capitalism is socialist revolution. The international working class must unify across national boundaries and mount a powerful global struggle to stop the drive to World War III, eliminate COVID-19 globally, and rebuild society on socialist foundations.



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