Last American state drops indoor mask mandates as Omicron BA.2 threatens to surge across United States

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The state of Hawaii has dropped its indoor mask mandate as of Saturday, March 26, a move announced by the state's Department of Health March 9. In addition, travelers to the islands will no longer be required to submit a proof of vaccination or recent negative coronavirus test for the first time since the state locked down in March 2020.

Mask mandates began dropping nationwide after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) changed its criteria for determining low, moderate and high risk from a measure of daily case counts to a measure of hospitalizations and bed occupancy. Counties and states that were deemed high-risk became low-risk overnight, and Democratic-controlled states such as California and New York used this as an excuse to drop mask mandates and the pretense of mitigation measures to slow the spread of the pandemic.

Even as those mandates were being dropped, however, warnings from leading epidemiologists were being issued warning of a new surge of the highly contagious Omicron BA.2 subvariant. Even before the initial wave of Omicron had subsided, BA.2 began spreading internationally, particularly in Europe.

In Germany, for example, the number of daily new cases currently stands at a record 225,000, well above the peak of 193,000 on February 10, as a result of the spread of BA.2. Similarly in France, cases have risen sharply from 52,000 a day to 123,000 a day in less than three weeks. And in Britain, daily cases, hospitalizations and deaths have begun to rise as the new subvariant takes hold.

Coronavirus-related deaths are also on the rise in Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and Switzerland.

Similar trends are in their initial stages in the United States. The number of total cases in New York City currently stands at 1,076 a day, a more than 40 percent increase over the past four weeks. New cases in New York state as a whole are about 60 percent higher than they were two weeks ago. In the southwestern United States, Arizona, California, and Nevada, as well as Hawaii, BA.2 currently makes up 41 percent of all coronavirus samples, up from 28 percent a week ago.

Data from Europe indicates that these preliminary indications predict a full surge sometime in the next few weeks. Nearly 35 percent of all coronavirus cases across the US are of the BA.2 subvariant, double the figure from two weeks ago. In Europe, case counts again began to trend upward after BA.2 became at least 50 percent of coronavirus cases.

While it is not clear how deadly the next wave will be, early studies of the subvariant in February from the University of Tokyo indicate that the subvariant may prove to be as deadly as the Delta variant, which was largely responsible for coronavirus waves last summer and fall, producing a combined official death toll of about 2.5 million people worldwide.

It is also worth noting that as the next wave of the pandemic is coming, even the most basic aspects of monitoring COVID-19 are being dismantled. Testing centers across the country are being shut down and states have begun reporting cases and deaths weekly, or sometimes only twice a month. Moreover, testing for the uninsured will no longer be paid for by the Health Resources and Services Administration due to a lack of funding. In other words, if any of the 31 million people in the US who lack health insurance suspect they have gotten COVID-19, they will not be able to get confirmation and possibly treatment without spending

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hundreds or possibly thousands of dollars out of pocket.

The Biden administration is instead pushing for the use of rapid antigen tests conducted at home. Yet it is known that these tests produce a significant number of false negatives if a person has contracted Omicron. The stage is being set for a new surge where the full extent will not be known until hospitalizations and deaths begin to rise. And with no central tracking system for the pandemic, workers will be forced to rely on anecdotes from social media to have any idea where outbreaks have occurred.

It is worth contrasting the response of the Biden administration to the surge of Omicron and the threat of BA.2 and the response of the Chinese government to a relative handful of the number of cases detected on its mainland. As daily cases in the US drop below 30,000, all precautions against the spread are being dropped.

On the other hand, as soon as daily cases neared 3,000 in China, a country with a population four times the size of the US, immediate and far-reaching measures were put into place on March 13 to contain the spread of the disease. The province of Jilin, home to tens of millions, was locked down and residents were tested repeatedly to catch both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases. Schools, restaurants and nonessential businesses were temporarily closed and after just two weeks, cases have leveled off at about 2,000 a day.

With cases exceeding more than 5,000 a day across the rest of the country, further lockdowns have been implemented. The most recent is in Shanghai, China's largest city, a major industrial and financial center and home to 26 million people. It is being placed under a phased lockdown in order to suppress the local outbreak of BA.2.

The lockdowns in China flow from its "dynamic zero" policy of dealing with the pandemic, which seeks to contain any outbreak of the coronavirus as swiftly and decisively as possible. As a result, despite the claims of the Western media, workers and youth in China have been able to lead relatively normal lives since the major lockdowns across the country were lifted in April 2020, following the original outbreak in Wuhan. Before the current BA.2 outbreak, China had suffered fewer than 100,000 total infections throughout the pandemic and less than 5,000 deaths.

The "dynamic zero" policy is now being tested again with the emergence of BA.2. And while there seems to be certain initial success in Jilin, the real threat is the continued reintroduction of the virus into China from those traveling to the country and pressure from the United States and the other major imperialist powers to undo all virus restrictions and "let it rip" so that their capitalist interests can operate unimpeded. The Chinese government has resisted so far, aware of the social explosion it would face if it allowed the virus to spread, threatening the lives of 1.4 billion people.

The basic weakness of China's policy, however, is its fundamentally national character, stemming from the nationalist politics of the Chinese Communist Party. The constant circulation of the virus, and the emergence of new and more contagious and deadlier variants is a gun constantly aimed at the heads of the population. The only solution to the pandemic is through an internationally coordinated struggle to bring COVID-19 cases to zero.

Such a campaign would start through the application throughout the world of the scientifically grounded techniques used in China and well known to epidemiologists. Mass testing, contact tracing, isolation of the infected and close contacts, and the closure of schools and nonessential businesses are necessary measures to contain and ultimately end the pandemic.

After more than two years of mass death, however, the ruling elite has let an estimated 20 million die in exchange for trillions of dollars of wealth generated through rising stock prices, and is willing to let millions more die as long as the money keeps coming in. Capitalism has placed a dollar amount on human lives. Workers and youth must answer this homicidal criminality with the struggle for socialism.

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