

The COVID-19 lockdowns in Shanghai and the fight for global elimination

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On Monday, authorities in Shanghai, the most populous urban area in China with over 26 million people, began a two-stage lockdown of the city. Residents east of the Huangpu River, which bisects Shanghai, will be under a strict “closed-loop” lockdown from March 28 to April 1, followed by all residents west of the river from April 1-5.

During these lockdowns, all transit will stop, nonessential workplaces will close, and schools will switch to remote learning. Every resident will be given multiple PCR tests in an attempt to identify all COVID-19 infections and cut off every chain of transmission. All symptomatic infections will be hospitalized, and people with asymptomatic infections will be safely monitored in isolation centers.

The lockdown of Shanghai, a major financial and industrial center of world capitalism, is highly significant. It takes place under conditions in which China is struggling to contain the worst outbreak of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic in late 2019, fueled by the highly contagious, immune-resistant and virulent Omicron BA.2 subvariant.

Since the beginning of March, COVID-19 infections have gradually risen across much of China, from a 7-day average of 119 daily new cases on March 1 to an average of 5,203 daily new cases on March 28, with a total of 75,037 infections identified this month. Tragically, on March 20 two people succumbed to the virus, the first deaths in China in over a year.

Compared to the horrific waves of infection that have swept the rest of the globe, these figures are minuscule, but they are the worst that China has experienced since first eliminating COVID-19 in early May 2020.

China’s ongoing outbreak is entirely the fault of the Western imperialist powers, led by the United States. Refusing to follow the lead of China and other Asia-Pacific countries which implemented policies necessary to stop the pandemic in 2020, they have instead allowed the virus to circulate throughout the world and infect billions of people over the past two years. They have enforced vaccine nationalism and upheld the profit interests of the pharmaceutical monopolies, leaving 85 percent of all people

in low-income countries entirely unvaccinated.

These homicidal policies have killed an estimated roughly 20 million people worldwide, according to the *Economist*’s tracker of excess deaths, while spawning ever more dangerous variants whose spread is increasingly hard to contain.

BA.2 is the most hazardous variant of SARS-CoV-2 to have evolved so far. It is believed to be roughly as infectious as measles, the most contagious pathogen known to man, as well as more immune-resistant than the Omicron BA.1 subvariant and as virulent as the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2.

The very fact that China has prevented the exponential growth of BA.2, as happened throughout much of the world with BA.1 and multiple countries with BA.2, is a testament to the strength of the “dynamic zero” elimination strategy that they have maintained.

However, the current outbreak is testing the limits of maintaining a Zero-COVID policy in China alone, and there are growing indications that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is debating some sort of shift away from this strategy. In addition to the objective challenges of stopping BA.2, considerable pressure has been brought to bear by global finance capital, as well as sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie and upper middle class whose financial interests are impacted by lockdowns.

In contrast to previous citywide lockdowns which were open-ended until all cases were identified and transmission stopped, the Shanghai lockdown is bifurcated and confined to only 9 days. Furthermore, it is belated and should have begun at least a week ago, as cases have steadily risen in the city since mid-March. On March 16, Shanghai recorded 158 new infections, followed by 983 on March 23, and then a record 3,500 on March 27. Over the past two days, Shanghai has accounted for the absolute majority of all COVID-19 infections across China.

Prior to an abrupt change of course Sunday evening, Shanghai officials had repeatedly stated that there would not be a broader lockdown. Instead, they touted their “precise

anti-epidemic measures,” which relied solely on mass testing, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine of infected and exposed people, and the targeted lockdown of individual neighborhoods.

In justifying this policy, officials explicitly cited the need to maintain economic growth. On March 20, Wu Fan, a member of the Shanghai government expert panel on COVID-19, stated, “Shanghai is irreplaceable to China’s economy. ... If the whole city stood still for a week or 10 days, it could be beneficial to curbing the pandemic. But the loss would be unbearable for small businesses and ordinary people.”

These comments were made three days after a significant meeting of the CCP’s Politburo Standing Committee, the country’s top decision-making body, at which Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that they must “strive to achieve the maximum prevention and control at the least cost and minimize the impact of the epidemic on economic and social development.”

An article published Monday in the CCP-run *Global Times* gives approval to Shanghai’s holding back from a lockdown until now, writing, “Some senior Chinese experts who closely follow the country’s handling of the COVID-19 outbreaks over the past years consider Shanghai’s exploration a courageous and necessary one, especially when more suggestions were made by epidemiologists in China and overseas to adjust China’s zero tolerance strategy in a more dynamic way in lowering the costs on social development and people’s livelihood, striking a balance between the regular anti-epidemic work and economic growth.”

The growing indications that China’s ruling elite is seriously considering an end to the Zero-COVID elimination policy are deeply concerning and must be opposed by the working class in China and internationally. Contrary to every portrayal of China’s pandemic policies in the Western media, they remain very popular in the Chinese working class.

The fundamental weakness of China’s Zero-COVID policy is its national character, which flows from the nationalist and pro-capitalist politics of the CCP. Encircled by world governments which are determined to let the virus rip *ad infinitum*, the CCP feels compelled to adapt to the homicidal policy of “living with the virus.”

In reality, any lessening of the Zero-COVID policy and even the adoption of a comprehensive “mitigationist” approach would prove disastrous for the Chinese masses. A report published on March 11 by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) modeled the impact that different pandemic scenarios would have in Guangdong province.

The “mitigation” strategy allowing for 50 percent of pre-pandemic travel and moderate public health measures would result in an estimated 55,205 total cases and over 500 deaths in 2022 alone in Guangdong. Extrapolated for all of China, over 600,000 people would likely be infected and over 5,500 would likely die in 2022. Under the “coexistence” scenario akin to the “herd immunity” strategy of the US and much of Europe, roughly 1.35 million people would die from COVID-19 in China in the rest of 2022 alone.

While such models may be useful in attempting to predict outcomes in the abstract, they cannot factor in the political significance of abandoning Zero-COVID and accepting a “mitigationist” position. As soon as this fatal step is taken, the virus will immediately become more difficult to contain and pressures will build to completely cave in to the “herd immunity” camp.

The pressures to abandon Zero-COVID must be overcome by the Chinese working class, in unity with workers in every country striving to end the needless suffering and death from COVID-19. The experience in China underscores the basic reality that there is no national solution to the pandemic.

Since February 2020, the *World Socialist Web Site* has continuously elaborated a strategy to mobilize the international working class in a unified movement to eliminate COVID-19 in every country in order to stop the pandemic once and for all. Now, under conditions in which humanity stands on the brink of a nuclear World War III, the fight for global elimination must be connected to the building of a mass anti-war movement.

The urgency with which this unified anti-war, anti-COVID-19 movement must be developed cannot be overstated. Not only the health but also the very survival of mankind hangs in the balance. The future depends on the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system and the establishment of world socialism.



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