

Despite BA.2's global dominance, World Health Organization shifting to end emergency phase of COVID-19 pandemic

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Yesterday, as the BA.2 subvariant of COVID-19 continued its assault, more than 1.5 million infections were reported worldwide, and over 4,000 people died from complications associated with their infections. Currently, this version of the Omicron strain accounts for 90 percent of all sequenced viruses.

Last week also saw global deaths surge 40 percent after declines from BA.1's ebb, with close to 46,000 succumbing as infections have risen across the globe. All told, almost one-half billion people have been infected and more than six million have died. Yet, these grim astronomical figures are known to be a vast undercounting, the best estimate places global excess deaths over 20 million.

Even as these statistics demonstrate that the pandemic is far from over, the World Health Organization (WHO) released its *Strategic Preparedness, Readiness, and Response Plan to End the Global COVID-19 Emergency in 2022*. The international health organization noted that two key objectives would need to be met: reducing COVID infections and early diagnosis and treatment of cases to reduce deaths. As the *Hill* summarized, "The WHO said that can be achieved by increased surveillance and monitoring, improving global vaccine equity, bolstering healthcare systems and supplies, as well as upgrading research and data analyses."

None of these objective measures have been met. On the contrary, they have become acutely worse as country after country has summarily ended any public health response to the present threat. These declarations, as experience has shown, are simply a prelude to the WHO acquiescing to pressures by the capitalist governments that keep a tight rein on their activities.

Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted in the report, "We now stand at a pivotal and dangerous moment in the fight against COVID-19. Although it is impossible to predict precisely how the SARS-CoV-2 virus will evolve, we know that new variants will arise as transmission continues and, in many cases, intensifies. And yet we can look into the future with a sense of hope that we can end the COVID-19 pandemic as a global emergency through our actions."

These comments are a betrayal of the international working

class and their welfare. The mixture of truth couched in rhetorical optimism can only mean the WHO as a public health organization has abandoned its principles as it tries to accommodate the demands of finance capital.

In the US, where cases have plateaued at an average of more than 30,000 per day for the last three weeks as BA.2 has become the dominant variant, governors of many states have already rescinded their state's COVID states of emergency. By April 22, only three states—Arizona, Nevada, and West Virginia—will have their emergency status in place "until further notice." And the rise in cases is arriving as all funding for COVID-19 response has been exhausted. As reporting requirements are being curtailed, states will be flying blind through the BA.2 storm that is gaining momentum each day.

Perhaps more concerning is the detection of a new version of the Omicron variant in the UK that has combined BA.1 and BA.2. In their *COVID-19 Weekly epidemiological Update* published on March 29, 2022, they wrote, "The XE recombinant [BA.1 and BA.2] was first detected in the United Kingdom on January 19, and more than 600 sequences have been reported and confirmed since. Early-day estimates indicate a community growth rate advantage of ten percent as compared to BA.2, however, this finding requires further confirmation."

The WHO acknowledged in reply that confirmation would be more difficult due to "the recent significant reduction in SARS-CoV-2 testing by several member states. Data are becoming progressively less representative, less timely, and less robust. This inhibits our collective ability to track where the virus is, how it is spreading and how it is evolving, information and analyses that remain critical to effectively end the acute phase of the pandemic."

According to the Office for National Statistics, in the UK, COVID-19 infections at the end of March reached a record high with almost five million people being infected in a single week. This accounts for one in 13 people in England with COVID. In conjunction with the rise in cases, hospitalizations have surpassed the BA.1 peak. The average daily COVID death rate has continued to climb and is currently at 220 and quickly

approaching its predecessor.

The European continent, and in particular Germany, is seeing BA.2 continue to rage. Despite the “reporting anomalies” in Germany, where multiple states had not reported data in several days, cases continue to climb. Germany’s per capita rate of infection is now higher than the peak reached in the US and the UK during their Omicron surges. The death rate is also increasing every day.

The situation will most likely grow direr as plans are underway to end mandatory quarantine for most people. More than four million people are currently isolated due to infection, impacting businesses ability to extract surplus value. Health Minister Karl Lauterbach has demanded that isolation be voluntary and to allow infected workers back on the job to address these concerns.

The complete disregard for the spread of infections and the continued evolution of the virus towards more contagious and immune-evasive forms will significantly impact the world’s population in the third year of the pandemic.

China, which has attempted to contain the virus using a Zero COVID strategy until now, is facing the full brunt of the malign neglect that characterizes the policies employed by every other country to place profits over lives during the pandemic. The virus that emerged out of Wuhan has been redirected against China as a more dangerous and formidable pathogen. The response to the virus has become a political line in the sand.

Indeed, suppressing the highly contagious BA.2 subvariant of Omicron is proving a difficult challenge for the Chinese authorities as more than 100,000 COVID cases have been reported domestically in March. At best, current efforts have managed to cap the community spread of infections which have affected multiple cities and provinces and dogged public health officials.

The National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China reported that yesterday’s daily case count was the largest one day total on record, with a total of 9,875 on April 1, 2022.

Approximately 4,500 of these cases were documented in Shanghai, the current epicenter of the pandemic in China and one of the world’s financial centers. The city’s two central banks—the China Construction Bank and the Bank of China—operating through the central government’s Ministry of Finance are responsible for managing capital investment funds for state enterprises.

The city’s lockdown, implemented in two phases, has perturbed global finance capital. Not mincing words, the *Financial Times*, the mouthpiece for financial oligarchs, in no uncertain terms asserted that “China will need a strategy to exit zero-COVID and live with the virus.” The implications of broad uncontrolled transmissions will have disastrous consequences for the Chinese working class. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that a large Shanghai elderly care hospital is battling a COVID-19 outbreak. They indicated some patients have died because of their infections, but Chinese officials have

not corroborated these reports.

According to the *Journal*, “Six replacement orderlies at the city’s Donghai Elderly Care Hospital, brought in after previous caretakers were sent away to quarantine, told the *Wall Street Journal* that they had witnessed or heard of the recent removal of several bodies from the facility, where they said at least 100 patients had tested positive for COVID-19.”

It may be reasonable to assume that the report is accurate and would be consistent, and in line with what is understood about the lethality of COVID-19. One Shanghai physician told the WWS, “I feel China is feeling the economic pain and is gradually lifting policies.”

These developments only underscore the need to press forward with elimination strategies against the virus and ensure life and livelihood are protected. But given the pressures being placed on China by global financial demands, a Zero COVID strategy will be more challenging to sustain on a national level as an elimination strategy must be pursued internationally. In this aspect, the Chinese state will not be able to find a progressive path out of the present crisis.

Meanwhile, the second phase of Shanghai’s lockdown commenced on Friday. However, given the persistent spread of the virus, authorities have said restrictions affecting areas east and south of the Huangpu River would stay in place for at least another three to ten days. This means the entire city of 26 million people is now under lockdown orders in the hopes of bringing cases back to zero. Mass testing continues to locate and map every infection.

On announcing a city-wide lockdown that will last for several days, Moody’s Analytics quickly added, “With China’s largest city closed for nine days, there will undeniably be an economic blow that will follow into the second quarter of the year.” Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist with the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, speaking with *Global Times*, countered, “Based on the experience accumulated from the past two years and our understanding of the virus’ mutations, I believe China is still able to realize the dynamic Zero COVID.”

Jilin City has announced they are exiting lockdown after three weeks despite having persistent daily cases in the 700 range. It will be critical to follow the trajectory of COVID cases in the capital city of the northern province and assess the response from the authorities. By all accounts, it remains premature to lift these stringent measures. But the statements by Moody and Wu posit the underlying contradictions that only the working class can resolve.



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