

The end of COVID-19 testing for the uninsured: The American ruling class doubles down on mass infection

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Last month, the US program that pays for COVID-19 tests for uninsured people stopped accepting claims “due to lack of sufficient funds.” This means that in large sections of the United States, those without health insurance will have no access to COVID-19 testing unless they can pay out of pocket. Some clinics have already started to turn away people without insurance who come to get tested and cannot afford to pay for it.

This takes place as a new wave of infections from the even more contagious Omicron BA.2 subvariant is gathering strength. The example of Europe, where BA.2 is driving a new surge in infections and deaths, is a warning of what is to come in the United States.

Many low-income workers and unemployed have already experienced the humiliation of being turned away from testing centers or vaccination clinics because they were uninsured and could not afford to pay the \$125 charge for a PCR test, the most accurate way to detect infection, or similar charges for vaccination. And of course, the uninsured have no way to pay the thousands of dollars that hospitalization for a COVID-19 infection would require.

Speaking last week, Biden ascribed the cutoff of funding for COVID-19 testing to “congressional inaction.” In reality, the ending of free COVID-19 testing and vaccination is entirely in keeping with the administration’s COVID-19 policy.

The Biden administration has used the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant as a pretext to abandon all measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. It is allowing virtually the entire American population to become infected and re-infected with COVID-19 into the future indefinitely.

To that end, in December, as the Omicron surge was just beginning, the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC) slashed the recommended duration of isolation in half for people infected with COVID-19. On January 21, the CDC, under the direction of the White House, launched a campaign for states to end mask mandates.

On March 26, Hawaii became the last US state to end its mask mandate. Every single governor, Democratic and Republican, has ended this most minimal mitigation measure.

The rollback of testing is occurring internationally. On April 1, free COVID-19 testing ended in the UK, almost simultaneously with the measure in the US.

Without testing, it becomes impossible to control the spread of the disease through isolation and quarantine, allowing it to spread unimpeded throughout the population, while suppressing official case numbers.

The effort to reduce testing is aimed at ensuring that major corporations continue to be provided with a steady stream of labor for exploitation, even if workers show up on the job ill and infect others.

The immediate cause of the end of free testing and vaccination was the failure of Congress to approve a \$15.6 billion measure to extend the program, in which the federal government purchased testing supplies and vaccines and delivered them free of charge to state-run testing and vaccination sites. This was removed from the legislation to fund the federal government that passed both houses of Congress two weeks ago.

As a result of this legislative wrangling, the additional funding for COVID-19 testing, treatment and vaccination, as well as further research, requires passage of a separate bill which needs the backing of at least 10 Republicans to overcome the expected filibuster in the Senate. The majority of ultra-right Republican senators want to shut down all coronavirus relief and mitigation measures based

on the claim that the virus has become “endemic” and should no longer be fought.

The bipartisan deal announced late Monday afternoon by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and a small group of Republican senators led by Mitt Romney of Utah will do little to undo the ongoing cutoff. It provides \$10 billion to purchase test supplies, therapeutic drugs like monoclonal antibodies and vaccines of various types. In other words, all this money will be paid to giant corporations, and not a penny will go to health care providers or their patients.

The \$10 billion represents a further reduction in what was originally, as drawn up in February by the Department of Health and Human Services, a proposal for an additional \$32.5 billion in spending to fight the pandemic—and this before the emergence of Omicron BA.2. The White House slashed this figure to \$22.5 billion in its proposal to Congress, and the House of Representatives cut it further to \$15.6 billion. Now the Senate is cutting it still further, to \$10 billion—less than the funding of a single weapons system, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, in the latest gargantuan military budget proposed by the Biden administration last week.

The latest cut in COVID-19 spending comes by eliminating entirely a Biden administration proposal to spend \$5 billion as the US contribution to global vaccination and anti-COVID-19 programs. This action testifies to the nationalistic bigotry and anti-scientific narrow-mindedness of both Democrats and Republicans, since it is impossible to fight the global outbreak of a deadly virus within the boundaries of one country.

In large portions of Africa, for example, only 15 percent of the population is vaccinated. There are figures nearly as high in parts of Asia, Latin America and even in poor, rural areas of the United States. Large populations of the unvaccinated, partly vaccinated, or unboosted are the ideal breeding ground for mutations of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The spread of the virus involves potentially billions of transmissions from one host to the next, each of which is an opportunity for the virus to mutate and find a more infectious, vaccine-resistant and lethal form.

The refusal of the world’s capitalist ruling elites to accept lockdowns that would result in a reduction in their profits is the cause of the worldwide spread of the infection and the emergence of such variants as Alpha, Beta, Delta, Omicron, and now Omicron BA.2, which has become the dominant strain of the virus all over the world.

In addition, the financial aristocracy calculates that there is an “upside” to the pandemic, since it disproportionately kills people who are elderly, retired or suffering from illnesses or other conditions that make it impossible for them to work. These millions are “unproductive” from the standpoint of the profit system and therefore best disposed of.

Even more people will be cut off beginning April 16 if the federal government ends the national emergency declared in 2020 by the Trump administration. Under the emergency, Medicaid coverage was greatly increased and many workers, previously ineligible because their incomes were “too high,” were added to the program. One study estimated that as many as 13 million people will be cut off throughout the rest of 2022 if the emergency declaration is allowed to lapse.

The impact on low-income working people is underscored by the Poor People’s Pandemic Report, issued Monday, which found that the 300 poorest counties in America had twice the death rate from COVID-19 as the 300 richest counties. During the Delta and Omicron surges this disparity shot up, to as much as a six times higher death rate as the threadbare health care systems in the poorest counties became overloaded.

As the poverty report and the cutoff of US assistance to global vaccination programs both demonstrate, the struggle against the pandemic is a class question. The fight against COVID-19 requires class unity among all American working people, black, white, Hispanic and Asian, and the unity between American workers and their class brothers and sisters around the world. There is no national solution to a global pandemic, and no way to carry out an effective struggle under the domination of the capitalist class.

A critical part of this struggle is to identify the social and class forces responsible for what is not a natural disaster but a massive social crime. To carry forward this struggle, workers in every country should support The Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*. This investigation is uncovering the impacts of the pandemic and identifying all those responsible for this needless suffering and death.



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