

COVID-19 cuts a swath through official Washington

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has tested positive for COVID-19, her office announced Thursday, one day after she was in the White House for two events and in close proximity to President Joe Biden. Pelosi, second in line of succession to the presidency, after Vice President Kamala Harris, is only the latest, and most prominent, among dozens of top officials in Congress and the Biden administration who have contracted the potentially lethal virus in recent weeks.

The list includes Attorney General Merrick Garland, CIA Director William Burns and Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo. Vice President Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff, tested positive, as did her communications director, Jamal Simmons. White House press secretary Jen Psaki contracted COVID-19 for the second time, and her deputy Karine Jean-Pierre also tested positive. Biden's sister, Valerie Biden Owens, tested positive, as well as Washington D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser.

A few hours after participating in Thursday's floor vote on the nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, Republican Senator Susan Collins said she had just tested positive.

Elsewhere on Capitol Hill, five more members of the House of Representatives announced this week that they have contracted COVID-19: Adam Schiff of California, chair of the House Intelligence Committee; Katherine Clark of Massachusetts, the deputy speaker; Scott Peters of California, Derek Kilmer of Washington and Joaquin Castro of Texas.

Of the 134 House members who have tested positive for COVID-19 since the pandemic began, 65, or nearly half, were infected since December 1, 2021, when Omicron became the dominant variant in the United States. Among these were the top three leaders of the House: Pelosi, Steny Hoyer and Jim Clyburn, all in their 80s. Of the 24 senators who have contracted COVID-19, 12 did so during the Omicron surge, exactly half.

Since early March, a series of political gatherings have served as hotspots for viral transmission within the political establishment, including the State of the Union address, a closed-door weekend retreat for leading Democrats, the annual dinner of the Gridiron Club (a major social event with nearly a thousand top political, media and business figures), and a White House ceremony Tuesday marking the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Affordable Care Act.

These meetings were a demonstration of incredible recklessness, as the 79-year-old president—who narrowly survived two brain aneurysms 34 years ago—has waded maskless into unmasked crowds of supporters and officials, shaking hands and administering hugs. In many cases he was accompanied by the 82-year-old Pelosi, or the 81-year-old Jim Clyburn, the minority whip and Biden's closest ally on Capitol Hill.

The fact that so many leading individuals in the American state have recently contracted COVID-19 is an indication of profound irresponsibility in these layers.

The *Wall Street Journal* explained the political motivation behind this reckless behavior: "Administration officials acknowledged that the president's regular contact with advisers and supporters could expose him to Covid-19. But they said it was important for Mr. Biden to project a sense of semi-normalcy as many Americans are opting to leave their homes, return to work and socialize with friends."

In other words, the rapid spread of COVID-19 through official Washington is the byproduct of a systematic campaign, spearheaded by the White House, to mislead the American public into believing that the COVID-19 pandemic is over. However, principled epidemiologists and public health officials warn that the Omicron BA.2 subvariant, now dominant in the US, is even more transmissible and dangerous than the Omicron BA.1 subvariant that ripped through the country this winter.

White House officials and congressional leaders have apparently deluded themselves into believing their own propaganda about a return to pre-pandemic conditions, or, as Biden recently put it, “the virus is no longer in control.”

But the string of illnesses in Washington exposes the fraud of official claims. In reality, COVID-19 continues to ravage the population, killing at least 24,000 people in the past month. The curve of infection has begun to turn upwards as BA.2 has become dominant in the US.

In the face of a new upsurge, the Biden administration is abandoning all measures to slow the spread of the pandemic. On April 7, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began allowing people actively infected with COVID-19 to fly—while “recommending” that they don’t!—and told state and local health departments they could stop reporting cases in which COVID-infected people were intending to fly.

In a campaign led by the White House, states are systematically working to cover up the pandemic. Last week, New Hampshire redefined what counts as a COVID-19 hospitalization so drastically that it would amount to counting “only 4 percent of COVID-19 patients,” according to one report.

States throughout the country are ending daily COVID-19 case and death reporting, with California being the latest state to end daily reporting. Only six states and Puerto Rico now report seven days a week, and at least 10 states report only once per week or less frequently.

In furtherance of the claim that the pandemic is over, the Democratic leadership has shown no urgency in extending emergency funding for expensive therapeutics like monoclonal antibodies as well as subsidies to pay for testing and vaccinations for low-income and uninsured people.

These were supposedly to be passed in a separate bill, which has now stalled in the Senate, put on the shelf while senators and congressmen take a two-week Easter recess. In the meantime, working people face charges of up to \$125 for a PCR test and thousands of dollars for antiviral drugs, let alone hospitalization, if they contract COVID-19.

While they are systematically shutting down access to such treatment for working people, the political elite in Washington (along with, of course, their bosses on Wall Street and in corporate America) are assured of the most comprehensive medical coverage and the most expensive treatment if they fall ill with COVID-19.

The Biden administration, the Democratic Party, and the financial aristocracy which they serve are doubling down on the policy of scrapping all efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, in favor of the same policy initiated by Trump and enacted by Republican governors in state after state: allowing the virus to spread without any restraint.

There is a class logic demonstrated here. The capitalist class and its political representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties reject the only serious, science-based means of fighting the pandemic, the policy of Zero-COVID, which entails a systematic mobilization of the resources of society, including temporary lockdowns, mass testing, contact tracing and all other public health measures needed to suppress the spread of the infection and eliminate the virus.

This policy would save millions of lives—as demonstrated in China—but the US ruling elite regards such methods with hatred and fear because they would impinge on the extraction of profit from the working class and threaten to destabilize the unprecedented speculative bubble in the financial markets. Moreover, they would cut across the plans of American imperialism to mobilize society for a different kind of war—the conflict with Russia, which threatens to escalate into a nuclear conflagration.

This raises another question. If the US political elite miscalculates so grotesquely about the dangers of COVID-19, even to themselves, what reason is there to believe that they will proceed any more rationally and cautiously in relation to the mounting danger of war with Russia over Ukraine? Such a war would involve the use of nuclear weapons, threatening the survival of humanity.

Only one social force can be mobilized behind a policy of eliminating COVID-19 worldwide, but that is the most powerful social force of all, the international working class. The decisive issue is the development of a mass independent movement of working people, based on a socialist and antiwar program.



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