

Profits over lives: The *New York Times* demands China end its Zero-COVID policy

Benjamin Mateus
15 May 2022

Since the beginning of March, China has confronted the highly contagious Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, brought into the country from outside, with a high degree of social mobilization and considerable difficulty, but so far with considerable success. That has not stopped the American corporate press from repeatedly and severely denouncing China's Zero-COVID policy, condemnations that rise in vitriol in proportion to China's progress in beating back the tide of infections.

In this regard, the recent *New York Times* report by the newspaper's Shanghai bureau chief, Alexandra Stevenson, who reports on the news of the financial world, is particularly foul. Headlined, "The World Tried to Move Beyond COVID. China May Stand in the Way," it caters to the prejudices of a deranged reactionary upper-middle-class layer who have staked their fortunes on ever-rising financial markets.

Stevenson opens with a provocative statement: "As the rest of the world learns to live with COVID-19, China's top leader, Xi Jinping, wants his country to keep striving to live without it—*no matter the cost.*"

Before addressing the various assertions the *Times* article makes, it bears reviewing the present state of the pandemic in China.

The current wave of infections across mainland China began in early March. Since then, China has documented close to three-quarter million cases, of which a significant majority were asymptomatic. Because of broad public health measures that included lockdowns and business closures, dynamic mass testing, and redirection of resources to build isolation centers and bolster medical treatment facilities, deaths were kept to less than 600, essentially all occurring in Shanghai except two in the northeast province of Jilin. By comparison, over the same period, the US reported 90,000 deaths from COVID.

The Chinese health authorities reported that there were 1,789 COVID cases on Sunday, of which 71 were newly imported. After reaching a peak of almost 27,000 in mid-April, the number of cases in Shanghai, China's financial hub and the epicenter of the Omicron wave, had dropped to 1,369, of which 166 were symptomatic. The seven-day average has fallen below 3,000 daily cases, down more than 90 percent from its peak four weeks ago. Outside of Shanghai, only 349 new cases were registered across mainland China.

Already, many Shanghai-based companies are resuming operations. City officials are targeting mid-May for opening after achieving zero-COVID community transmission. More than 99 percent of all new cases are currently among those under lockdown or quarantine, accounting for 2 million of the city's 26 million inhabitants. Nearly 18 million residents (70 percent) are in designated precautionary

areas, including communities, villages, companies and other sites without a positive case for more than two weeks.

The elimination strategy appears promising despite repeated claims in the corporate media that Omicron can't be eliminated. Deaths have been kept to the lowest possible level, life has been preserved, and the country is transitioning to reopening its production and distribution centers. Given this premise, Stevenson should be asked what she means by China's intent to live without COVID "no matter the cost?" The cost for who? Obviously she cares only about the financial cost for Western investors, not the cost in human lives for the Chinese people.

The day before Stevenson's report appeared in the *Times*, President Joe Biden acknowledged in a perfunctory prerecorded statement, using only 213 words, that over 1 million Americans have died from COVID. This is the same president who said, as a candidate in October 2020, that a president like Trump, who had allowed more than 200,000 deaths from COVID, should be considered disqualified from office. Under Biden's tenure in the White House, more than 600,000 have lost their lives to the pandemic.

Stevenson made no mention of this as part of the "cost" of living with COVID.

Nor does she acknowledge that the *Times* has played a central role in promoting the "herd immunity" policy that has morphed over the last two years into "living with the virus," as the ruling classes in the imperialist countries have repeatedly prioritized profits over lives, allowing the pandemic to run wild, rather than impose temporary lockdowns on business operations that have been proven effective in halting the spread of the virus. This "let it rip" policy has led to the deaths of more than 20 million people globally, pushed hundreds of millions into poverty, and forced billions to face the manifold health consequences of chronic infections with a virus that will reinfect populations again and again.

Thomas Friedman pioneered the phrase "the cure can't be worse than the disease" in a *Times* column published March 23, 2020, which asserted that measures such as lockdowns and school closures to block the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus were off limits because they would destroy the economy. This slogan was picked up by the Trump administration and the media because it served the interests of finance capital. Now it serves as the basis of the policy of the Biden administration.

Stevenson is duplicitous when she writes, "For more than two years, China kept its COVID numbers enviably low by doggedly reacting to signs of an outbreak with testing and snap lockdowns. The success

allowed the Communist Party to boast that it had prioritized life over death in the pandemic, unlike Western democracies where deaths from the virus soared.”

First, the issue of prioritization isn’t life vs. death. Stevenson conceals the real issue: it’s life vs. profits. And if “Western democracies” were envious of China’s low COVID numbers, then why didn’t they emulate the lessons of Chinese public health experiences and save the lives of their populations? Finally, it is a basic tenet of well-established public health policies, going back to the 19th century, to insist on “doggedly” chasing every infection to prevent mass outbreaks. This is not a specifically Chinese doctrine and has nothing to do with the Stalinist politics of the Chinese Communist Party.

Instead of dealing with these facts, however, Stevenson first depicts the lockdowns as harrowing and anti-democratic and then cites the observation of an “unnamed economist” that the policy is “zero movement, zero GDP.”

The realities are otherwise, however. China’s economy remains intact. Its per capita death rate of four per million from COVID versus the US with 3,068 deaths per million has shown the superiority of the Zero-COVID strategy. Stevenson’s “no matter the cost” is only a more obscene version of the formula proposed by Friedman, openly declaring that when human life clashes with corporate profit, profit must win out.

It is telling that the one prominent health official whom she cites as part of her anti-China diatribe against Zero-COVID is the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. He said last Tuesday, “We have discussed this issue with Chinese experts, and we indicated that the approach would not be sustainable. And considering the behavior of the virus, I think a shift would be very important.”

The WHO director’s comment is a reactionary statement refuting his previous statements that the world should fight to save every life possible. This is the same organization that for two years resisted accepting the scientific evidence that the virus was airborne rather than carried in large droplets. The comment only betrays, objectively, the subordination of all public health measures to the interests of international corporations. Like the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the UN health agency has been transformed into an appendage of global finance capital.

Stevenson does cite an important study published in *Nature* from Fudan University in Shanghai, which found that if Omicron were allowed free rein in China, in six months, the country could expect 112 million symptomatic cases, 5.1 million hospital admissions, 2.7 million ICU admissions and 1.6 million deaths, as well as the catastrophic collapse of its health system.

The clear import of this study is that unleashing COVID in China would be a colossal catastrophe, not only for China, but for the world, since 100 million more cases means 100 million more opportunities for the virus to mutate into even deadlier and more infectious variants.

But Stevenson ignores this in favor of her obsession with financial rather than human cost. She proceeds to write, “Investors and business leaders worry that China’s rigid adherence to its Zero-COVID policy could send the economy into free fall. ‘It is high time for the government to change its strategy,’ said Fred Hu, a prominent Chinese investor. The benefits of Zero-COVID no longer outweigh the economic costs, he added. ‘Sticking to the Zero-COVID strategy would decimate its economy and undermine public confidence.’”

In support of this concern, Stevenson writes, “By one estimate,

nearly 400 million people in 45 cities have been under some form of lockdown in China in the past month, accounting for \$7.2 trillion in annual gross domestic product.”

This is a number created in the spirit of Mark Twain’s aphorism against “lies, damn lies, and statistics.” China’s lockdown procedures are highly segmented, with cities broken up into small districts, each with rules enforced by local committees. If one district in a city of 10 million is under lockdown, generally because of a single positive test, then the entire 10 million is counted in the estimate prepared by Nomura Bank. Hence the slippery phrase employed by Stevenson: “some form of lockdown.”

The *Times* writer also ignores a salient fact that entirely refutes her portrayal of the Zero-COVID policy as repressive and undemocratic: it is widely popular among the Chinese people, something that is generally acknowledged even in hostile media reports.

Americans living in China have praised this policy, including one who commented on Stevenson’s article. Sean, who is now working from home in Shanghai, writes:

As an American living in China, I click on every article regarding China, and many, many are like this: taking perverse delight in putative failure of China’s zero Covid policy. This is unseemly but also factually delusional.

The USA has nearly 3,000 deaths per million from Covid.

China has 3...

China’s economy has not gone into recession:

China’s gross domestic product (GDP) exceeded 114 trillion yuan (about \$18.1 trillion) in 2021, registering an increase of 8.1 percent over the previous year and an average growth of 5.1 percent over the preceding two years.

He concludes: “there is so much ideologically motivated disinformation in Western media it’s infuriating to someone who lives here.”

Sean’s post attracted more than 100 favorable responses in the comment section following Stevenson’s article, becoming the second highest rated by readers.

Rather than deal with this dose of reality, the *Times* evidently prefers to suppress it, engaging in its own form of political censorship, no less noxious than the Stalinist variety. Sean’s comment praising the Zero-COVID policy has now been deleted.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact