

Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants fuel yet another global surge of COVID-19 infections

Benjamin Mateus, Evan Blake
26 June 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic is once again spiraling out of control in a growing number of countries, driven by the highly contagious and immune-evading Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants. North America, Europe, Brazil, India and Australia are at the epicenter of the latest broad-based surge. After reaching a low of 466,297 daily new cases on May 30, the global seven-day average of daily new cases now stands at 661,420. The number of official new infections is growing despite the widespread dismantling of surveillance and reporting of COVID-19 metrics, with test positivity rates rising in each of these countries and regions.

The sudden rise in test positivity rates means that unreported infections are occurring faster than those being documented by public health departments. For instance, in the United States, where BA.4 and BA.5 account for more than 35 percent of sequenced cases, the seven-day average of daily new cases has risen by roughly 10 percent over the past week, reaching 109,105 daily new cases on Sunday. However, the test positivity rate has been continuously over 10 percent since mid-May and continues to rise. After several weeks in which the average daily death toll stood between 300 and 350 per day, it has now climbed to 420, according to the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 dashboard.

Portugal, which experienced its second largest wave of infections during the pandemic in early June due to BA.5, also saw its positivity rate exceed 50 percent by June 1. Eighty-six percent of Portugal's population is fully vaccinated, and 65 percent have had at least one booster shot, yet daily new deaths have surpassed the peak reached during the first Omicron wave over the winter. This highlights the critical fact that COVID-19 vaccines alone will not stem repeated assaults on the population.

Test positivity rates are skyrocketing across the rest of Europe, with Spain reaching 30 percent, France surpassing 20 percent and Germany exceeding 40 percent by mid-June. Brazil is in the midst of its fourth wave, while the fascistic Bolsonaro government has effectively ended all pandemic emergency measures. Testing has, for the most part, come to a standstill.

In the UK, the seven-day average of daily new cases has jumped fourfold from a low of 4,754 per day on June 2 to 19,695 infections per day today, while hospitalizations have surged 27 percent in three weeks, and the death toll has begun to turn upwards once again. As in many countries, the elderly will face the brunt of this assault. Most completed their vaccinations several months ago, and they have limited immunity against infection, with their age and medical condition placing them at risk for severe consequences.

In Israel, where the vaccination-only strategy has been emphatically promoted, COVID-19 cases have jumped nearly five-fold over the past three weeks, approaching 10,000 cases per day. In the same period, hospitalizations have more than doubled. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, 255 people are in serious condition, with 41 intubated and two on heart and lung bypass machines. The positivity rate is an astronomical 41.5 percent.

Australia has remained in a continuous undulating surge of infections since the first Omicron wave slammed into the island nation, and daily new cases are once more pushing upwards. As of yesterday, more than 3,000 were in hospitals receiving treatment.

In the past two months, at least four studies have been published in scientific journals proving that the Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants are highly resistant to immunity from the vaccines, as well as from prior infection with the Omicron BA.1 and BA.2 subvariants that have been dominant throughout the world since late November. With immunity from both vaccines and prior infection waning and pandemic restrictions totally lifted amid the summer travel season, the implication is that potentially billions of people could be infected globally in the coming weeks and months.

While nearly every world government refuses to protect its population from yet another assault by the deadly pathogen, mainland China reported only two COVID-19 cases yesterday. The seven-day average of new COVID-19 infections has declined to just 24. Shanghai, which defeated a difficult wave of infections last month, reported only a handful of new COVID-19 cases last week.

The differences between China's dynamic Zero-COVID policy and the imperialist nations' demand that the working class "live with the virus" could not be more stark. Even without another surge of deaths, the current death rate in the United States would amount to an annual death toll of at least 130,000, almost four times higher than an average flu season and 25 times higher than China's cumulative death toll from COVID-19.

Furthermore, evidence is mounting that after its acute impact, COVID-19 can cause far more harm to the human body's various organ systems in a disease process known as Long COVID or Post-Acute Coronavirus Syndrome (PACS), which afflicts 10-30 percent of those infected.

In the US, approximately 50 percent of the adult population was infected by February, a figure that has risen considerably since then. Last week, the US government officially acknowledged that upwards of 20 million American adults are presently suffering from Long COVID, which includes a wide range of symptoms that can assault the cardiovascular, pulmonary, renal, neurological and other organ systems.

Debilitating Long COVID may impact one-third of all Long COVID patients, profoundly affecting their ability to work or care for themselves and their families for an undetermined period. Other studies have emerged showing that vaccines provide very little protection against Long COVID, and even individuals with mild COVID-19 symptoms face an increased risk of dying from complications from their infections compared to their uninfected counterparts.

For the ruling elites, inaction in addressing the pandemic is snowballing as they face continued massive labor shortages, a by-product of people being sickened by infections and reinfection. In addition, many workers have given up on the job market because of the attacks on their wages and living standards. Unrelenting inflation is compounding these processes.

Faced with this mounting crisis, the corporate media is issuing increasingly delusional statements on the pandemic. This was exemplified by a *Washington Post* editorial board statement published Sunday titled, "The pandemic is in a twilight zone. Enjoy it—but stay safe."

The editorial begins with a series of absurd claims, stating, "The pandemic has entered a twilight zone, neither causing major disruption to the nation nor vanishing. Everyone is looking forward to a summer without masks or terrifying case spikes. The government has dropped the requirement that international air travelers test before entering the United States. We have vaccines, antivirals and diagnostic tests in surplus. So far, so good."

Every one of these claims is false. As noted above, the US

is presently in the midst of a major surge of infections, which have risen steadily since the beginning of April. This escalating surge has disrupted all industries, in particular the airline industry, where staffing shortages have fueled unprecedented numbers of flight delays and cancellations. Funding for vaccines, antivirals and tests is now gone, supplies are evaporating, and congressional Republicans have made it absolutely clear that not a penny more in pandemic funding will be allocated.

Owned by the pandemic profiteer Jeff Bezos (net worth \$140 billion), the *Post* expresses here in the most unvarnished form the recklessness and stupidity of the American ruling class. It is these social parasites who are living in a "twilight zone" of fantasy and self-delusion.

The Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants are the most contagious versions of SARS-CoV-2 so far. With world capitalism refusing to implement public health measures and thereby providing the virus with billions of hosts, it remains fit to continue evolving into potentially more dangerous variants. This evolutionary process is occurring so rapidly that vaccine makers cannot keep pace with the changes in the virus' genomic sequence, with scientists warning that the next iteration of the COVID-19 vaccine produced by Moderna is already outdated.

The only viable pandemic strategy remains that of global elimination, which could end the pandemic in a matter of months. This entails the deployment of all public health measures, coordinated on a world scale, to stop the spread of the virus once and for all. Capitalism has proven utterly incapable of mounting such a response, an historic task which falls to the international working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact