

Taiwan experiencing one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the world

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In recent weeks, COVID-19 cases and deaths have surged in Taiwan, with tens of thousands of new infections occurring daily. This is the result of Taipei's decision to remove virus mitigation measures and to allow the deadly virus to run rampant. The corporate media has hailed Taipei's actions as part of the agenda of placing profits before lives and also to demonize Beijing's zero-COVID policy.

As of Tuesday, Taiwan officially recorded 311,253 cases for the previous week, the most throughout all of Asia. This was more than three times as many as Japan, which recorded the second-largest number of cases in Asia in that period, according to the Worldometer website. Taiwan was surpassed globally only by the far more populous countries of Germany, the United States, France, Brazil, and Italy. Given the increased use of the more unreliable rapid antigen tests in Taiwan, it is almost certain that the actual number of cases is much higher.

Taken as a percentage of population, the outbreak in Taiwan, with 23.9 million people, reveals an even more tragic situation. A total of 980 people, or 41 people per million, have died in the past week alone, one of the highest per capita rates in the world. Throughout the course of the pandemic, 6,448 people have died from COVID-19 in Taiwan, the vast majority in the last two months. By contrast, mainland China, with a population of over 1.4 billion people, has had just 5,226 deaths, and none since the end of May when Beijing successfully halted a major outbreak in Shanghai.

The decision to allow COVID-19 to run rampant is being portrayed as a response to the latest outbreak that began in April. Falsely claiming that 99.5 percent of cases were mild or asymptomatic, Premier Su Tseng-chang stated that month, "We will not lock down cities like Shanghai did, but we also won't remove our masks

or stop taking virus prevention measures."

However, the decision had been made long before that to abandon all mitigation measures. According to *Nikkei Asia* on April 15, an anonymous Western diplomat in Taipei, concerned about the impact of COVID restrictions on big business, stated that the government "told us three months ago they had decided to open up... But we have seen very little progress."

In other words, Taipei's claim that cases in the current outbreak were mild and therefore had allowed the island to remove restrictions is fraudulent. Instead, Tsai Ing-wen's government was looking for an excuse to lift restrictions that would not anger the population, with many still favoring restrictions. A poll at the end of April found that 46.3 percent of people favored a zero-COVID policy while 45 percent supposedly supported "living with the virus." Anti-Beijing propaganda undoubtedly played a role in decreased support for mitigation measures from earlier in the pandemic.

All of this is before the introduction of the highly contagious and immune-evading BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants to Taiwan. On Monday, Taiwan's Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) announced that it had discovered 61 cases of BA.4 and BA.5 infections in travelers arriving from abroad, between June 10 and 18, bringing the total number to 126. While no cases of domestic transmission of these subvariants have been recorded yet, it is only a matter of time.

Despite the fact that the two subvariants have been driving a new surge of COVID-19 cases around the globe, this has not caused the Tsai government to rethink its lifting nearly all mitigation measures, including quarantine procedures for those testing positive and for both close contacts and overseas

travelers.

While quarantine for people with positive tests has been cut to seven days, that of close contacts has been reduced to three days with four days of self-monitoring. The definition of a close contact has also been scaled back to include only those living together or working in close proximity.

On May 3, the same day new COVID cases officially soared to 23,128 on the island, Taipei announced it would reduce its 10-day quarantine requirement for new arrivals to seven days. By the end of the month, the island saw a record-high of 94,610 new daily cases on May 27. On June 15, the requirement was slashed further to three days. All of this means the quarantines are largely useless and will likely be scrapped in the near future.

The contrast between Beijing's widely popular zero-COVID response on the mainland and Taipei's decision to allow the deadly virus to tear through the population is stark. While Beijing's policy has saved millions of lives and successfully contained outbreaks, Tsai's government and her ruling Democratic Progressive Party is sacrificing the population to the interests of global finance capital.

Led by Wall Street, the ruling classes around the world have denounced Beijing's zero-COVID approach, complaining about the impact on the global economy. The *Washington Post*, for example, wrote on April 29, as the outbreak in Taiwan gained steam, "The mounting economic cost and human toll of China's unflinching 'zero covid' policy has given ammunition to those who believe a shift to living with the virus is inevitable."

The Taiwanese bourgeoisie, however, is not simply bending to pressure from foreign capital. Its earlier promotion of virus restrictions was not based on concern for the population, but out of fear that allowing the virus to run rampant would lead to widespread anger in the working class, similar to the mass discontent that was expressed during the 2002–2004 SARS epidemic.

Now with the widespread promotion of anti-mainland sentiment in the establishment media contrasting with Taiwan's "very successful approach," in the words of the *Guardian* in May, Taipei feels it can lift restrictions, while drawing a false equivalence between virus elimination measures and authoritarianism.

This is also the tactic Washington is using to blame China for the growing economic crisis around the world, contrasting the supposedly "democratic" Taiwan to mainland China. In doing so, Washington is seeking to challenge the "One China" policy that states that Taiwan is a part of China, which the US formally acknowledges.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, first under Trump and then Biden, Washington has falsely accused Beijing of being responsible for the pandemic while holding up Taiwan as an example to be followed, thereby challenging Beijing's legitimacy. The mounting toll of infections and deaths gives the lie to these claims and underscores the criminal character of the let-it-rip policy being pursued by virtually every government around the globe including in Taiwan and the US.



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