

White House reluctantly proclaims monkeypox a public health emergency

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On Thursday, US Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Xavier Becerra formally declared monkeypox a public health emergency. The announcement is long overdue, coming two-and-a-half months after the first case of monkeypox was detected in the United States on May 18 and 12 days after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on July 23.

Disturbingly, there was a clear effort to minimize the announcement and the profound dangers of monkeypox, with the White House YouTube channel and every broadcast news outlet choosing not to show the live press conference. Over the past three months, the Biden administration and corporate media have adopted the same approach towards monkeypox as Donald Trump took towards COVID-19, which he explained to journalist Bob Woodward on March 19, 2020: “I wanted to always play it down. I still like playing it down, because I don’t want to create a panic.”

Trump was, of course, referring to a market panic that would hurt the financial interests of his Wall Street cronies. Biden has similar concerns, since the Democrats serve the financial oligarchy just as much as the Republicans. But in the ordinary meaning of the term, there are profound reasons for there to be widespread panic in the population over the collapse of any serious effort to stave off a second pandemic on top of the first. Urgent action is required, but the impetus for it must come from the working class. No section of the ruling elite will lift a finger.

Monkeypox is taking hold worldwide just as the Omicron BA.5 subvariant has caused the latest global surge of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths. Given the disastrous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed an estimated 22 million people and disabled tens of millions more worldwide, there is every reason to expect that monkeypox will be allowed to wreak havoc in the coming months, despite formal proclamations of a “state of emergency.”

As of Thursday, there are now over 26,250 confirmed infections in at least 80 non-endemic countries throughout the world, with the seven-day average of daily new cases standing at 1,268. Under conditions where testing is severely limited worldwide, it should be assumed that even these alarming figures are significant undercounts.

Monkeypox is a dangerous disease with symptoms similar to but less severe than smallpox, which was eradicated in 1980. The virus causes lesions to form on any part of the body, which can lead to blindness, asphyxiation, and scarring on the face or any other body

part in some people. Patients often describe the progression of monkeypox lesions as the most painful experience of their lives, causing them to lose the ability to sleep or perform basic bodily functions without excruciating pain. Roughly 10 percent of all cases have required hospitalization, primarily to manage this intense suffering.

Historically, the infection fatality ratio for the strain of monkeypox now spreading worldwide has been estimated to be roughly one percent, similar to that of COVID-19. A recent study estimated the current global reproductive number (R-value) to be roughly 1.29, while in the US this rate stands at 1.55, the highest such value among all non-endemic countries.

One can be infectious with monkeypox for over a month, including before the onset of lesions, and should be in isolation throughout this time period after confirmed exposure. The virus can spread through aerosols, droplets and fomites, with the dominant modes of transmission believed to be skin-to-skin contact and respiratory droplets. A major concern among scientists is the ability of monkeypox to spread through contaminated fabrics and surfaces, while a July 12 report from the Department of Homeland Security noted that the virus “may be stable for days to weeks in water, soil, and on refrigerated food.”

While the corporate media have largely portrayed monkeypox as affecting only men who have sex with men, with the implication that it is a sexually transmitted infection (STI), in reality it is an *infectious disease* which threatens all of society. A 2016 study on monkeypox found that males comprised only 57 percent of all infections. It is entirely coincidental that the disease has initially spread among men who have sex with men, and it is now quickly spreading throughout society via non-sexual routes of transmission. Ignoring these scientific facts, the far-right has immediately used fascistic rhetoric to scapegoat gay and bisexual people.

Given the numerous routes of transmission and appallingly poor efforts to inform the public of the dangers of the infection, monkeypox has the potential to spread rapidly, in particular as schools reopen internationally after summer or winter breaks. Already, there have been 96 confirmed infections among children worldwide, including five in the US, while hundreds of millions of children are set to congregate in indoor school settings throughout the world in the coming weeks. Children are not eligible for any vaccine against the virus and have historically been at greater risk of severe disease and death than adults.

The virus is already spreading through factories and other workplaces, with an autoworker at Sterling Heights Assembly Plant outside Detroit, Michigan, telling the *World Socialist Web Site* that a coworker tested positive this week. The United Auto Workers (UAW) union and company management are both attempting to cover up the infection.

Given the ability of the virus to survive on surfaces for long periods of time, every auto plant, warehouse, grocery store and gas station could soon become a vector for transmission, as well as other workplaces. The long isolation period required to keep workers safe will not be tolerated by big business, which will compel workers to return while infectious or face economic ruin.

All indications are that monkeypox will be treated with the same indifference and recklessness as COVID-19, with the same pursuit of a bankrupt vaccine-only approach. The company that produces the only approved vaccine, Nordic Bavarian, has refused to relinquish intellectual property rights to allow for mass distribution globally, propelling a nearly three-fold rise in the firm's stock value since the first case was detected in May. Testing has been deliberately hampered for the past two months, while data reporting has been abysmal, making the real extent of the infection's spread largely unknown.

Before Thursday's declaration of a public health emergency, the Biden administration appointed Robert Fenton to serve as the national monkeypox coordinator, with Dr. Demetre Daskalakis serving as his deputy. Fenton has no background in medicine or public health, and before this appointment was a regional director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). While Dr. Daskalakis has a public health background working in HIV/AIDS prevention, he was also an early minimizer of the dangers posed by both COVID-19 and monkeypox.

On January 29, 2020, at a time when SARS-CoV-2 was already spreading undetected in the United States due to a complete lack of testing, Dr. Daskalakis stated at a press conference in New York, "Science says have fun, be a New Yorker. There's no reason to avoid any part of the city." Within weeks, the city became the global epicenter of the pandemic and experienced what remains one of the highest death rates from COVID-19 anywhere in the world. As recently as June 2022, when monkeypox cases were beginning to skyrocket in the US, Daskalakis falsely stated, "the overall risk to the US public is low."

In the corporate media, there is already an effort to portray monkeypox as endemic or soon to become endemic. In the description of its article on Thursday's declaration of a state of emergency, the *New York Times* wrote, "many experts fear containment may no longer be possible." On August 1, *The Daily Beast* ran an article headlined, "It May Be Too Late to Stop Monkeypox Becoming Endemic in the U.S. and Europe."

On July 17, in a prominent Sunday morning interview on the CBS program "Face the Nation," former Food and Drug Administration (FDA) head Scott Gottlieb proclaimed, "We're now at the cusp of this becoming an endemic virus." Two days later, *STAT News* ran an article headlined, "With monkeypox spreading globally, many experts believe the virus can't be contained."

All such claims are unscientific and must be rejected with

contempt by the working class!

Workers cannot allow a repetition of the criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is still entirely possible to eliminate monkeypox across the US and eradicate the virus throughout the world, including in African countries where the virus actually has been endemic for decades and has killed over 70 people this year. With monkeypox now spreading alongside COVID-19, workers in every industry and every country must adopt a global elimination strategy towards both pandemics.

Similar public health measures must be implemented worldwide for both monkeypox and COVID-19, including mass testing, rigorous contact tracing, universal mask mandates, the safe isolation of all infected patients and quarantining of exposed people. All schools must switch to remote learning and nonessential workplaces must close temporarily, with workers and small businesspeople guaranteed full income protection. If these measures were implemented globally, monkeypox could be eliminated worldwide within weeks and COVID-19 by the end of this year.

An essential lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the basic principles of public health are incompatible with the decaying capitalist system, which subordinates all social needs to the profit interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy. In just the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, the world's billionaires amassed over \$5 trillion as millions died globally.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is the only political tendency in the world that has continuously opposed the homicidal policies implemented by nearly every world government and fought for a socialist response to stop the pandemic globally. In May 2021, the ICFI initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to organize the struggles of the international working class against the pandemic, independently of the unions and capitalist parties which enforced the brutal back-to-work campaign on behalf of the corporations.

Today the IWA-RFC is fighting to stop both the monkeypox and COVID-19 pandemics, as well as climate change, the skyrocketing cost of living, and the threat of nuclear war. This global network of action committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, must be expanded in every industry and every country to mount an effective struggle to defend the social interests of the working class, including a life free of controllable infectious diseases.



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