

One year since Omicron was declared a variant of concern: A balance sheet

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One year ago last Thursday, a new, highly-infectious and immune-resistant variant of the coronavirus was first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by the Network for Genomics Surveillance in South Africa after being detected in Botswana and South Africa. Two days later, the WHO declared it a “variant of concern” with the name Omicron, recognizing that it had the possibility of quickly becoming dominant globally.

The mortal danger of Omicron, however, was quickly suppressed by the world’s capitalist governments and corporate media. The warnings of scientists that Omicron could cause a wave of infection hitherto unseen during the pandemic were buried under proclamations that the new variant was “mild.”

The tone was set by US President Joe Biden, who attempted to foist responsibility onto those who were unvaccinated by using a partial truth, that “the unvaccinated have a significantly higher risk of ending up in a hospital or even dying,” and twisting it into the false claim that vaccinated people were all “protected from severe illness and death.”

Such statements were repeated by world leaders throughout last winter, in a concerted effort to downplay the dangers of Omicron. The new variant was seized upon to falsely promote vaccines as the panacea to end the pandemic, to renounce lock-downs, masks and other basic public health measures as unnecessary, and to normalize ongoing infection and mass death.

A year of mass infection, death and debilitation

Over the course of the past year, the “herd immunity” strategy pioneered by the far-right in 2020 was adopted by nearly every world government outside China. This was epitomized in the statement by Dr. Anthony Fauci in January 2022 that Omicron would provide a “live-virus vaccination,” a false and pseudo-scientific conception that encouraged mass viral transmission.

The results of this policy shift have been catastrophic. According to official figures, over the past twelve months 1.4 million people have lost their lives globally to Omicron. Estimates of the real global death toll via excess deaths places the tally at 5.2 million, a quarter of all excess deaths during the pandemic.

One year later, the Biden administration is doubling down on the lies that cost millions of lives, including more than 297,000 in the US alone. In a press briefing on November 22, Fauci stated that “there’s a 14 times lower risk of dying” if one is vaccinated and boosted compared to one who is unvaccinated.

In fact, vaccinated people still get sick and die by the hundreds every day. A recent study of CDC data by the Kaiser Family Foundation, which the White House and the corporate media have covered up, found that as of August more than half of those that have died in the US have been vaccinated. In other words, at least 23,000 of the 46,000 Americans that have died from the coronavirus pandemic in the past fifteen weeks have been vaccinated. While the vaccines still provide relative protection against hospitalization and death, the danger of breakthrough infections, of the virus being able to evade immunity and kill, is real and present.

Not only has Omicron killed millions, it has infected *billions*, leaving numerous long-term health problems whether the virus’ victims had symptoms from the initial infection or not. These include but are not limited to asthma, diabetes, brain damage, muscular and skeletal weakness, multiple organ damage, increased risk of heart failure, stroke, and joint impairment.

By allowing the coronavirus to circulate and mutate in billions of hosts, new variants have evolved at an increasing pace. The Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta variants all produced their own waves of infection and death. Omicron is a step further, with surges of subvariants—including BA.1, BA.2, BA.5, BQ.1, and BQ.1.1—that have multiplied in their hundreds.

With each new immune-resistant Omicron subvariant, the immense risk of reinfection with COVID-19 has been heightened. A major study published November 10 in *Nature Medicine* made clear that each COVID-19 reinfection causes cumulative damage to one’s body, increasing their risk of all-cause mortality and Long COVID. It exposed the horrific reality of the “forever COVID” policy of the Biden administration, in which wave after wave of the pandemic will encircle the world, leaving behind increasing levels of death and debilitation in its wake.

Long COVID is increasingly common and has essentially become a pandemic in its own right. An August report from the Brookings Institution found that 16 million working-age Americans (18-65 years old) suffer from the ailment, including up to 4 million so disabled that they can no longer work, numbers that will only increase as long as the country’s population continues to get infected and reinfected.

Extrapolated to the world’s population, the report suggests that as many as 400 million people internationally could now be afflicted with Long COVID and may have it for years to come, with tens of millions disabled to the point that they can no longer work.

The deepening COVID cover-up

Over the past year, the Biden administration has utilized the lie that “Omicron is mild” to completely dismantle the ability to track the pandemic in the US, in an effort to cover up the extent to which the virus is spreading. The charge was led by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which ended the requirement for hospitals to report their daily coronavirus death count to the federal department as Omicron was at its peak last January. What had been the centralized repository for recording those who died each day from the coronavirus was taken apart in one fell swoop.

Following the dictates of the Biden administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has spent the past year repeatedly changing its guidelines to encourage the lifting of every mitigation measure, above all mask mandates. Most recently, the agency switched from daily to weekly reporting of COVID-19 infections and deaths in order to cover up the coming winter surge.

States have followed the lead of the CDC and HHS, gradually ending daily reporting of cases and deaths. Currently only two states, New York and Arkansas, as well as Puerto Rico, still report cases and deaths on a daily basis. Thirty-eight states only publish data on a weekly basis, and Nebraska, North Dakota and Washington D.C. have stopped reporting coronavirus deaths altogether. Eight states—Alaska, Florida, Nevada, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma, Iowa and Illinois—no longer report testing, the first line of defense in hunting down the disease.

At the same time, the most recent wastewater data, one of the few remaining reliable ways to track the pandemic, show that even as official case counts are trending downward, the real number of cases is again increasing, potentially setting the stage for a third winter of death.

A compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis, available in epub and print formats.

The lessons that must be learned

The experiences of the past year, and throughout the entire pandemic, demonstrate conclusively that capitalism is incompatible with the social interests of the working class. The drive for profits ultimately places a secondary value on human life. Workers are forced to labor in deadly conditions, with their exploitation funneling ever greater sums of wealth to the billionaires.

A critical lesson of the past year is that COVID-19 can still be eliminated globally, even the highly-infectious Omicron variant. At the beginning of June, China’s largest city, Shanghai, reopened after a two-month lockdown that successfully beat back an outbreak of the BA.2 subvariant. The lockdown was implemented when there were 3,662 cases a day in the city, a figure which peaked in April at just under 30,000 a day and reduced to essentially zero six weeks later. Fewer than 600 people lost their lives during the entire surge.

The Shanghai lockdown was a stunning example of the policy of Zero-COVID, which entails a genuine mobilization of public health measures—universal masking, mass testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation and quarantine of infected and exposed people, and temporary lockdowns—in a scientifically planned manner to crush the coronavirus.

The fundamental weakness of this policy, however, has always been the nationalist basis upon which it has been deployed, including by the

governments of China and previously New Zealand, Vietnam and other countries. Zero-COVID cannot be sustained indefinitely in a single country as the virus continues to circulate and mutate everywhere else.

At the same time, imperialist interests dominated by the US have long demanded that Zero-COVID be dropped globally. Faced with a mounting economic crisis and the threat of an exodus by companies such as Apple, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) finally gave in on November 11, and the results have already been disastrous.

Cases in China have jumped past 38,000 a day in a matter of weeks and threaten to infect the whole of China’s 1.4 billion inhabitants. Such a scenario would be catastrophic, potentially killing millions amid a complete collapse of the country’s health care system. It would also provide 1.4 billion more hosts in which the virus could evolve and mutate further into more infectious and deadly variants.

The only solution to the coronavirus pandemic is an international strategy of Zero-COVID, fought for and implemented by the working class. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned the day after Omicron was declared a variant of concern, “The emergence of this new strain of COVID-19 is a devastating exposure of the policy implemented by capitalist governments, spearheaded by the United States and Europe, which have opposed lockdowns and other critical public health measures necessary to stop the spread of the disease.”

Since then, the WSWS has been the only publication that has consistently warned of the ongoing and emerging dangers of the virus and the need to fight for the global elimination of COVID-19. This cannot be achieved through appeals to the capitalist governments and corporations, or imposed via bureaucracies, but must be fought for by the international working class. Workers must form rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighborhood as part of a massive social and political movement to end the pandemic and the social system which produced it, capitalism.



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