

Antisemitism and anti-Chinese racism: The case of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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While dining at an upscale restaurant last week in Manhattan, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is challenging President Biden for the Democratic presidential nomination, gave voice to fascistic sentiments about the origins of COVID-19. According to a report published Saturday in the *New York Post*, Kennedy claimed that Jews and Chinese people are less susceptible to the virus which is the cause of the global pandemic, and that this may be the result of deliberate genetic engineering.

In a two-minute video recording of his remarks, published on the newspaper's web site, Kennedy can be heard saying, "In fact, COVID-19, there is an argument that it is ethnically targeted. COVID-19 attacks certain races disproportionately." He goes on to claim, "COVID-19 is targeted to attack Caucasians and Black people" because of "the genetic structure" of the virus. "The people who are most immune are Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese," Kennedy said, citing a July 2020 scientific paper which makes no such claim.

Kennedy is a proponent of the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is a man-made virus released by Chinese scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology together with their American colleagues. The implication of Kennedy's statement is that the disease is a biological weapon created by Chinese researchers and Jewish American scientists to kill Christians.

There is a deep historical resonance in Kennedy's comment, which bears comparison to the "blood libel" against the Jews, first concocted as far back as the Middle Ages, when Jews were accused of secretly draining the blood from Christian children. Such lies were revived by Russian Tsarism in its fabrication of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" to justify pogroms against the Jews, and then taken up by the Nazis in their genocidal effort to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe.

In 2021, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a perspective that described the conspiracy theory as "The

Wuhan lab libel," in reference to its parallels with the antisemitic blood libel.

Kennedy's racist conspiracy theory could be termed the Protocol of the Elders of Wuhan—a crude amalgam of antisemitism and American nativist hysteria against the "Yellow Peril." The pseudo-science of the Chinese lab leak "theory" is combined with the medieval fiction that Jews were immune to and responsible for the Black Death.

In reality, New York City, with the largest Jewish population in North America, was the city hardest hit by the first wave of COVID-19. And China, which largely escaped the pandemic for more than two years through mass testing, tracing and quarantining, has suffered a colossal death toll in the eight months since the Zero-COVID policy was abandoned under pressure from world imperialism, including the United States.

Kennedy cannot be dismissed as a lunatic or fringe conspiracy theorist. He is giving expression to powerful trends within the US ruling elite, which is deliberately whipping up fascistic sentiments that have a long history in America—antisemitism, racism, anti-Chinese bigotry—under conditions of escalating imperialist war against Russia and preparations for an even broader and more dangerous war against China.

This goes beyond the role of Trump and the Republican Party in fomenting bigotry towards immigrants and racism towards China. The top newspapers aligned with the Democratic Party, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, have been principal promoters of the Wuhan lab lie—the right-wing conspiracy theory, first floated by Trump's fascist counselor Steve Bannon, that SARS-CoV-2 was created at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and then released to infect the world.

They also assiduously promoted the fiction of "Russian intervention" in the US electoral process, as the Democratic Party sought to divert all popular hatred of

Trump's reactionary administration into a campaign against the Putin regime in Moscow, which prepared the way for the current US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

In that war, the Biden administration and the entire corporate media have systematically legitimized a fascistic narrative, covering up the neo-Nazi ties of Ukrainian forces like the Azov Battalion, and the collaboration with the Holocaust on the part of Stepan Bandera and other Ukrainian fascists now hailed as national heroes by the regime in Kiev.

Last week's NATO summit was held provocatively in Vilnius, Lithuania, only a short drive from the Russian border, a country now run by the political heirs of the Lithuanian fascist collaborators with Hitler, who rivaled the Gestapo in their zeal to exterminate the Jews. The assembled NATO leaders said nothing about the fact that their host city was a focal point of the Holocaust.

Kennedy's ravings shed light as well on the bankrupt and reactionary character of the campaign for a "left-right alliance" launched by various figures aligned with the pseudo-left, including author Chris Hedges and journalist Glenn Greenwald. They might personally abhor Kennedy's remarks about Jews and Chinese, but Greenwald conducted a sympathetic interview with Kennedy after he launched his presidential campaign, which gave considerable attention to his opposition to vaccine mandates and other COVID mitigation measures.

A long-time anti-vaccine campaigner, Kennedy has used his financial resources in a politically criminal effort to link basic vaccines against childhood illnesses to the growth of autism. That did not stop the promoters of the "left-right alliance" from embracing his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, with former Democratic Representative Dennis Kucinich, an opponent of the Iraq war, as his campaign manager. As the son of Robert F. Kennedy and nephew of John F. Kennedy, he has high name recognition and initial credibility with a public unfamiliar with his deeply reactionary outlook.

The response in the corporate media to this filthy outburst has been remarkably restrained. It has not been treated as a disqualifier that would force Kennedy out of the race. Only one Sunday television talk show even mentioned it, and that as an afterthought.

Particularly noteworthy is the anodyne report in the *New York Times*, supposedly the newspaper of record, and one with a large Jewish readership who were undoubtedly alarmed and disgusted when they learned of Kennedy's comments. The first version of the *Times* report carried the headline, "Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Covid Remarks

Raise Questions of Antisemitism." One might ask, what "questions" could remain, given the assertion that COVID was "targeted" to spare the Jews. Only later, likely after protests both external and internal, was the headline changed to read, "Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Airs Bigoted New Covid Conspiracy Theory About Jews and Chinese."

Kennedy's remarks demonstrate a more general proposition about capitalist politics in time of war. Imperialist war is inevitably accompanied by the worst forms of ideological reaction, including antisemitism, which aim to incite the popular hatred of the "enemy" required for imposing sacrifices in living standards, democratic rights and human lives, and to divert and divide the inevitable resistance of the working class to the war and all its consequences.

As Leon Trotsky wrote in *The Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International:

Before exhausting or drowning mankind in blood, capitalism befouls the world atmosphere with the poisonous vapors of national and race hatred. Anti-semitism today is one of the more malignant convulsions of capitalism's death agony.

An uncompromising disclosure of the roots of race prejudice and all forms and shades of national arrogance and chauvinism should become part of the daily work of all sections of the Fourth International, as the most important part of the struggle against imperialism and war. Our basic slogan remains: Workers of the World Unite!



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