

Scientists raise alarm over global spread of new highly-mutated COVID-19 variant

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Over the past few days, scientists throughout the world have increasingly sounded the alarm over the emergence of a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Identified as BA.2.86 and given the nickname “Pirola,” the variant has 35 mutations on the spike protein that distinguish it from Omicron XBB.1.5, the most recent variant that was dominant globally and for which the next iteration of vaccines has been designed.

After first being detected in Israel on Sunday, Pirola was sequenced in Denmark and then the United States, with England announcing a case on Friday. The detection of Pirola in four countries on three continents indicates that it is a fit variant that has likely begun spreading globally undetected for some time.

Commenting on the evident community spread in different parts of Denmark, molecular virologist Dr. Marc Johnson tweeted Friday, “The three Denmark cases were from different parts of the country and had no known contact with one another. This is looking more and more like an avalanche.”

The genomic difference between Pirola and XBB.1.5 is comparable to that between the first Omicron variant and the original strain of the virus. The large number of mutations on the spike protein first enabled Omicron to circumvent antibodies generated by the vaccines and prior infections, causing the largest global wave of infections, including breakthrough and reinfections, at any point in the pandemic.

Despite a relentless propaganda campaign falsely claiming that Omicron was “mild,” it caused millions of deaths globally and likely the largest wave of Long COVID of the entire pandemic. Scientists are warning that Pirola could potentially cause a similar “Omicron-type” event, in which billions of people globally become infected or reinfected with COVID-19.

Whether or not Pirola is more likely to hospitalize or kill patients will not be known for weeks or months, as these are lagging indicators.

While independent scientists are fighting to educate the public on the emergence of the Pirola variant, capitalist politicians throughout the world and almost every corporate media outlet have remained criminally silent.

The growing concern about this new variant comes amid what is already clearly a major new global wave of the pandemic, predominantly fueled by the EG.5 variant nicknamed “Eris,” which now accounts for over 30 percent of sequenced cases globally.

The latest wastewater data from the US released Thursday shows that over the past eight weeks, the level of viral transmission has increased by 227 percent nationally, more than tripling. At present, it is estimated that nearly 610,000 Americans are being infected each day, and 6 million are currently sick with COVID-19, near the peak levels reached during the Delta wave in 2021. This surge is largely being driven by Eris, which became dominant last week and now accounts for 20.6 percent of sequenced cases.

COVID-19 hospitalizations are also quickly rising throughout the world. Across the US, hospitalizations rose 60 percent between July 8 and August 5, the most recent date for which data are available. In recent weeks, hospitalizations and intensive care unit (ICU) admissions have more than doubled in New York, often a bellwether for the rest of the country.

Significant surges are also taking place in South Korea, Japan, Italy, the UK, Spain and other countries. There are already concerns that China is beginning a third wave of the pandemic after lifting its Zero-COVID elimination strategy last winter, which led to

two catastrophic pandemic waves that likely killed upwards of 3 million people.

As summer and winter breaks end throughout the world, hundreds of millions of children are returning to schools. This will only add fuel to an already raging fire, as schools have been known throughout the pandemic to be key centers of viral transmission.

The ongoing global wave of mass infection and the danger of this being compounded by the Pirola variant take place just three months after the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Biden administration ended their COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) declarations in early May. These unscientific decisions prompted the total collapse of already ruined pandemic surveillance systems globally.

Testing, contact tracing and reporting of cases are now nonexistent throughout much of the world. Genomic surveillance, which is necessary to track the evolution of SARS-CoV-2 and the global spread of new variants like Eris and Pirola, has drastically declined over the past year, in particular after the scrapping of the PHEs.

But perhaps the most significant result of these regressive policy decisions, which have been accompanied by an unrelenting propaganda campaign in the corporate media, is that the vast majority of the world's population has been misled into believing that the pandemic is over. Billions of people are now totally unprepared for the next stage of the pandemic, which is quickly sweeping over global society.

On Thursday, tailing the independent citizen scientists who discovered Pirola, the WHO and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) both announced that they were tracking the spread of the new variant. These announcements were largely aimed at damage control, as both institutions stand thoroughly discredited for their role in covering up the ongoing dangers of the pandemic.

It is not yet known whether Pirola will take off globally or if it is more likely to cause severe disease and death, but these outcomes are entirely possible. In fact, such dangers are only increasing as the virus is allowed to spread freely and mutate in billions of hosts.

The capitalist response to the COVID-19 pandemic has amounted to an unending stream of lies, misinformation and homicidal policies designed to maximize the production of profit and subject the

population to perpetual waves of infection, death and debilitation with Long COVID.

While unlimited resources are provided for the imperialist war machines and bank bailouts, a pittance is allocated to scientific research into next-generation COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and the renovation of infrastructure to prevent airborne transmission. High quality masks, accurate tests, treatments and now even vaccines are all unaffordable or inaccessible to billions of people internationally.

The financial oligarchy that runs society is thoroughly hostile to the social interests and well-being of the great mass of the population. As capitalism descends into the barbarism of world war, the fascist mantra of “survival of the fittest” once again reverberates through the halls of power.

The present experience, in which masses of people on every continent are suffering major waves of the pandemic while their governments and media do nothing but cover it up, reveals the underlying social antagonism of modern society—that between the capitalist class and the working class.

A central task facing the revolutionary socialist movement is to imbue the working class with an understanding of this conflict and the political program necessary to stop the pandemic, as well as war, fascism, climate change and all the great social problems arising from the capitalist system.

Fundamentally, the pandemic is a social and political crisis which can only be resolved through the mass, unified struggle of the international working class, in coordination with principled scientists in every country. From the beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) have clearly explained this imperative and provided leadership in this struggle. Now, as new and potentially more dangerous variants sweep the globe, it is ever more necessary to deepen this fight on a world scale.



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