

The WHO and the inability of capitalism to prevent future pandemics

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Speaking at the World Governments Summit in Dubai on Monday, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged governments to finalize negotiations on the WHO's Pandemic Agreement to ensure its adoption at the upcoming World Health Assembly to be held in May.

Efforts on the WHO Pandemic Agreement began in December 2021 at the second-ever special session of the World Health Assembly, which is the governing body of the WHO. At that time, coinciding with the rapid global spread of the Omicron variant, the WHO's designation of the COVID-19 pandemic as a public health emergency was still in effect. The special session convened for the lone agenda item of:

Consideration of the benefits of developing a WHO convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic preparedness and response with a view towards the establishment of an intergovernmental process to draft and negotiate such a convention, agreement or other international instrument on pandemic preparedness and response, taking into account the report of the Working Group on Strengthening WHO Preparedness and Response to Health Emergencies.

The United Kingdom's mission in Geneva, Switzerland, tweeted at the time: "The #Omicron variant shows yet again why we need a common understanding of how we prepare for and respond to pandemics, so we're all playing by the same rules."

The development of the agreement has slowly proceeded since that time, with a "Proposal for Negotiating Text" released at the end of October 2023.

Per that text, the overall objective of the agreement is to strengthen the world's capabilities to prevent and prepare for future pandemics. It aims to ensure that all nations are conducting surveillance of potential spillover events, and have access to the requisite resources, such as medicines, vaccines and hospital capacity, to respond to infectious disease threats. It specifically cites as motivation for the agreement the world's uneven preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic and inequalities among nation states in access to resources.

However, since the release of the proposal in October, negotiations have stalled over several issues. Ghebreyesus' remarks at the World Governments Summit were intended to prod the negotiating teams towards resolution of the issues.

Similarly, a letter from 50 prominent scientific, political and social figures urges politicians worldwide to help ensure the successful adoption of the agreement. The letter states:

In summary, we call on leaders today to step up now and

empower your negotiators to make the decisions which would ensure an ambitious and legally-binding pandemic accord.

It is your responsibility to collaborate globally to make the world safer and more stable. A new pandemic threat is inevitable. A new pandemic is not – if we act now. Implementation of an effective accord is vital to make COVID-19 the last pandemic of such devastation. Do not miss this history-making opportunity.

Ghebreyesus' remarks at the World Governments Summit, however, were entirely hypocritical. While urging the world to prepare for the next pandemic, he repeatedly spoke of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the past tense, stating, "Today I stand before you, in the aftermath of COVID-19..." and "If [a new pandemic] struck tomorrow, we would face many of the same problems we faced with COVID-19." He also stated, "As the generation that lived through COVID-19, we have a collective responsibility to protect future generations from the suffering we endured."

These were the most explicit formulations to date by any WHO official falsely presenting the COVID-19 pandemic as over. They contradict very recent statements from the WHO's COVID-19 Technical Lead Maria Van Kerkhove, who stated on January 12, "What is critical to know right now is that the public health risk from COVID remains high globally." On February 6, Van Kerkhove told *Scientific American*, "The virus is rampant. We're still in a pandemic."

The United States is presently in its second-highest COVID-19 surge ever, surpassed only to the initial Omicron wave. COVID-19 is spreading unchecked in Europe, with levels in Germany reaching heights not seen since the summer of 2022.

The WHO and Ghebreyesus are entirely culpable for this situation, having prematurely declared an end to the COVID-19 public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) on May 5, 2023. This action, as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, had no basis in science and represented "...a complete and total abrogation of all modern public health policy, which has centered on preventing and stopping outbreaks of deadly pathogens and fighting for the elimination and eradication of communicable diseases."

Earlier, the WHO only belatedly recognized the science behind the airborne transmission of COVID-19, thus profoundly miseducating the global population on the basic mechanism through which the virus spreads.

Ghebreyesus also contradicted himself by describing the agreement as a "legally-binding pact" and at the same time noting "...the agreement actually affirms national sovereignty." As with all United Nations endeavors, the pandemic agreement has no enforcement mechanism on those nations who fail to meet their obligations.

It is reminiscent of other toothless UN initiatives that lack accountability mechanisms. In fact, Ghebreyesus gave his speech in the same city where

the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) took place last November, a fact he noted in his remarks. As the WSWS commented on that conference,

Everything about this year's COP28 summit expresses the total indifference of capitalist governments to the accelerating climate catastrophe. The conference is being hosted by the United Arab Emirates, a country which generates a third of its gross domestic product from fossil fuel sales. It has nominated as president of the summit Sultan al-Jaber, the CEO of the state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). Under these conditions, the summit has been described as a "trade show" for the fossil fuel industry.

Other UN resolutions and rulings have proven similarly incapable of restraining nation states, including the recent resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and the International Court of Justice's ruling insisting that Israel treat the Gaza strip and the West Bank according to international law. Israel has continued to act with impunity, and the imperialist powers continue to provide it the means to carry out genocide and ethnic cleansing.

In his remarks, Ghebreyesus blamed "...the litany of lies and conspiracy theories about the agreement..." for the failure of negotiations to make progress, but in doing so he missed the mark. The true culpability resides with the capitalist system and its central contradiction between a globalized economy divided into rival nation states. This is the true origin of nationalist opposition to global cooperation as undermining national sovereignty, a key critique of the pandemic agreement.

Indeed, one of the key sticking points in the negotiations relates to its provisions on intellectual property. The agreement currently entails "time bound" waivers of intellectual property rights to enable countries around the world to manufacture vaccines and other products needed to combat pandemics in their territories.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw the pharmaceutical monopolies refuse to share mRNA vaccine technology with developing nations, a considerable factor in the abysmal vaccination rates seen in lower-income countries. The proposed text for negotiation rightly calls out this behavior as inhibiting the control of the spread of infectious diseases and addresses it by including commitments to intellectual property waivers.

However, these provisions have been ardently opposed by the pharmaceutical companies. The International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA) wasted no time in condemning these provisions, calling them "bad" and "damaging" and saying they would have "a chilling effect on the innovation pipeline for medical countermeasures."

National governments beholden to these corporations also weighed in against the intellectual property provisions of the agreement, with German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach telling the World Health Summit:

For countries like Germany and most European countries, it is clear that such an agreement will not fly if there is a major limitation on intellectual property rights...

This stringent opposition to the pandemic agreement exists despite the fact that the provisions on waivers are rendered toothless by the qualifying language "...to the extent necessary." There is nothing in the text that states who will determine what is necessary nor how. It stands as an escape clause, and yet the capitalist system nevertheless inveighs against

any form of intellectual property waiver.

Ghebreyesus' remarks, the stagnation of the negotiations on the pandemic agreement, and the corporate interests causing that stagnation all serve as a stinging indictment of the failures of the capitalist system to meet global challenges. The resistance of the IFPMA and the German government exemplify the subordination of public health to private profit.

Of course, the entire history of the capitalist system's response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic calls out in stark terms its massive failures and crimes. Corporations dictated prices, forced the inequitable distribution of supplies including medicines and vaccines, influenced public health policy against scientifically-based measures, demanded the ending of zero-COVID policies in China and other nations, and induced governments to return spending on public health systems to pre-pandemic levels or lower.

The end result has been the needless deaths of nearly 30 million people and the debilitation of hundreds of millions more throughout the world.

These travesties have been accompanied and compounded by a dramatic increase in social inequality. Oxfam recently released a new report documenting this phenomenon, noting that 5 billion people have become poorer since 2020 while the world's five richest men have doubled their wealth at a staggering rate of \$14 million per hour. Billionaires collectively have gained \$3.3 trillion of wealth in the same time period. The richest one percent of individuals globally now control 43 percent of the world's wealth.

Capitalism's response to the pandemic both in terms of death and illness and this massive rise in social inequality, as documented extensively by the *World Socialist Web Site*, is a great social crime. Turning to the institutions of capitalism and demanding that they change course is an exercise in folly. They have proven impervious as they stoke the fires of World War III and enable a deadly virus to tear through vulnerable populations *ad infinitum*.

The international working class must assimilate the lessons of the pandemic, above all the inability of capitalism to organize on a global scale to address the current pandemic and prevent future ones. Indeed, these immense global tasks fall to the working class itself, which must reorganize the world economy on its own terms to prioritize social needs, including public health, over corporate profits. This can only be achieved through an international socialist program, with the goal of ending capitalism and its contradictions and building a new society that protects and promotes health, resolves climate change, and ensures social equality.



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