

The political significance of the first death from H5N1 “bird flu” in the US

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The first human death from H5N1 in the United States is an event of historical significance, laying bare the destructive policies of the ruling class to the public’s health. Announced on January 6, the death comes almost exactly five years to the day from the first recorded death from COVID-19 in China on January 9, 2020.

The event reaffirms the immense danger posed by the virus and its potential to spark a pandemic, well understood by the scientific and public health community since it was discovered in 1997. As of December 12, the World Health Organization had received reports of 954 human cases with 464 deaths, for a case fatality rate of 48.6 percent.

There is a stark contrast between the experts alerting the public to the danger and the approach of the entire corporate media and political establishment. The latter have continuously downplayed the risk, in particular as the virus has become entrenched among dairy cattle across the US over the past year.

It is highly evident that the central lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic drawn by the American ruling class is that public health must be subordinated to maintaining corporate profits and preserving financial markets. Over the past five years, roughly 1.5 million Americans have died from COVID-19 or related health impacts, while globally there are now roughly 30 million excess deaths, and the bourgeoisie haven’t batted an eye.

Indeed, the ruling class has concluded that deaths of the elderly from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are a positive good, expressed most callously by none other than Dr. Anthony Fauci, who advanced the eugenicist proclamation that the elderly and infirm will “fall by the wayside.”

On Sunday, ABC’s “This Week” featured an interview with Dr. Ashish Jha, Biden’s White House COVID Response Coordinator from April 2022 until May 2023, on the growing spread of bird flu in the US. Reprising his

role as the official purveyor of soporifics, Jha adopted his standard nonchalant tone and demeanor, seeking to minimize the dangers of H5N1 and disarm the population to the existential threat posed by a bird flu pandemic.

Throughout the interview, Jha made several misleading and outright false statements, and confirmed that the official response to bird flu would be “business as usual.” He began with an extraordinary falsification of the Trump administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming, “When COVID arrived on our shores about five years ago we didn’t know anything about the virus. We didn’t know how it was transmitted. We didn’t have any treatments, vaccines, tests.”

In fact, the Trump administration knew much about the virus before it hit US shores, as was made clear in the tapes leaked by journalist Bob Woodward in September 2020. At the time, the WSWWS wrote:

As demonstrated by Trump’s description of his phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Chinese authorities were as transparent with US officials as they were with the public health community, precisely explaining the disease’s method of transmission, its fatality rate and the measures necessary to contain it.

Furthermore, a COVID-19 test was available from the World Health Organization as early as January 2020.

Dr. Jha then went on to note that tests and vaccines for H5N1 currently exist. However, he omitted the fact that nowhere near enough testing is occurring, nor are the vaccines actually being deployed to fight the virus or protect frontline farmworkers or healthcare workers. As reported by the WSWWS, numerous experts have been calling for increased testing and deployment of vaccines,

but their calls have fallen on deaf ears.

When asked by interviewer George Stephanopoulos about what can be learned from human cases of H5N1, Jha immediately downplayed the seriousness of the virus, stating that “...the majority of them have been mild.” This statement ignores all cases of the virus outside the United States and prior to 2024.

Furthermore, several aspects of human cases in the US must be kept in mind. First, the US has an advanced healthcare system with life-saving resources not available to developing countries. Second, nearly every case received antiviral treatment known to reduce the risk of death with seasonal influenza. Third and most importantly, the strain of the virus in mild cases is different from the one that caused the patient death in Louisiana.

That strain was similar to the one that caused another recent severe case of H5N1 in a Canadian teenager, who was hospitalized and placed on a ventilator for weeks. In both cases, the strain developed mutations that enabled it to reproduce in respiratory tissue. Thus, as opposed to the strains causing mild disease, this more deadly strain is far more likely to transmit from human to human and cause the next pandemic.

Jha mentions the Louisiana patient, but the only lesson he draws is: “What we’re learning is that the virus is continuing to evolve. And what we’re learning is that the virus can cause really serious illness.”

Any first-year biology or public health student learns that viruses continue to evolve, and H5N1 has long been known to cause serious illness and death. This statement is therefore a blatant lie and a misdirection intended to blind the public to the true significance of the strains causing severe illness.

Jha’s reassurances about having tests, vaccines, and treatments for H5N1 also ignore the fact that in two weeks Trump will once again be President of the United States, and that he has nominated the anti-vaccine huckster Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as Secretary of Health and Human Services.

All indications are that RFK Jr. will be confirmed. A recent report by The Hill suggests that Bernie Sanders and John Fetterman will vote to confirm him. Thus far, only one Republican has expressed any concerns, Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy, who has simply declared that RFK Jr. is “wrong on vaccinations.”

Having measures in place to fight a pandemic is therefore meaningless if the people in charge of the federal government’s response do not believe in them and

refuse to deploy them, or even refuse to believe the H5N1 virus is a true threat.

Already, the same right-wing forces that generated and promulgated massive quantities of misinformation and lies on COVID-19 are revving up their misinformation engines on H5N1. As reported by Walker Bragman on Substack, they are adapting their previous lies to the current threat.

These lies include that the virus was created from “gain of function” research, that it is being deliberately released by a conspiracy, that the threat is exaggerated, that concerned scientists are really shilling for the pharmaceutical corporations, that Anthony Fauci is personally responsible for the virus, that there is a conspiracy to use the threat to direct more money to mRNA vaccine research, and that one can protect oneself from H5N1 and other pathogens with a regimen of vitamin C, vitamin D, melatonin, and ivermectin.

The incoming Trump administration is determined to fully dismantle the threadbare public health infrastructure that remains in place after the Biden administration’s disastrous “forever COVID” policies. To a far higher degree, misinformation and anti-science messaging will disseminate from the highest levels of government. Not only will there be minimal if any response to H5N1, but a wide array of pathogens, some of which have been eliminated for decades, will return with force. Already, as reported by the WSWS, a number of diseases are surging as the most anti-public-health administration in history is set to take control.

The only path forward for eliminating H5N1, COVID-19 and other scourges from the planet is for the working class, under its own political program, to replace capitalism with socialism, a system that puts human life ahead of private profit.



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