

5 years of the COVID-19 pandemic: The origins of a social catastrophe

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Five years ago, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This marked a critical nodal point in what would become the worst global public health crisis since the 1918–1920 flu pandemic, profoundly impacting the health and lives of the entire world’s population and destabilizing social and political life in every country.

This somber anniversary has been met with near-universal silence from the political establishment and corporate media of every country. Virtually every column published has minimized the catastrophic character of the pandemic and referred to it in the past tense, despite the fact that COVID-19 continues to disable and kill millions of people globally each year.

The cumulative toll of the pandemic is difficult to both quantify and fathom. Excess death estimates indicate that roughly 30 million people have now died globally from acute COVID-19 infection or the myriad adverse health impacts the virus has on the body.

Long COVID, first documented by patients in May 2020, now affects over 400 million people globally. Numerous studies have shown that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, can persist in every organ system and even cross the blood-brain barrier, producing over 200 documented symptoms that are often debilitating. COVID-19 infections have been definitively linked to increased risk of heart attack, stroke, kidney disease, lung damage, immune dysregulation, a wide range of neurological disorders and more.

Multiple scientific studies have shown that the risk of developing Long COVID is compounded by each reinfection. Wastewater data, now the only reliable metric to track the spread of the pandemic, shows that the average American has been infected by COVID-19 nearly four times. At the current trajectory, this figure will reach eight infections per person by March 2030. A similar reality undoubtedly exists throughout the world.

What caused this disaster, and who bears responsibility?

In the most fundamental sense, the capitalist system—based on the division of the world into rival nation-states and the subordination of social needs to private profit—is the source of the socially criminal policies implemented globally in response to the pandemic.

The corporate-financial oligarchy who run society decided at the outset that nothing would be done to disrupt the flow of profits and the rise of the stock market. Their aim was to use the pandemic to establish that the principal interest and policy aim of bourgeois governments under all conditions is to augment their wealth and increase exploitation.

By the time the WHO declared a pandemic, just over two months had passed since the scientific community became aware that a

dangerous new coronavirus had been detected. From the very beginning, critical time was lost. As was later revealed, the Trump administration and other governments were informed in early February 2020 of the immense dangers posed by COVID-19 but deliberately chose not to coordinate an international response, adopting instead a policy of “malign neglect.”

By mid-February, it had become clear that the US and the world were confronting a deadly pathogen, and if rapid action was not taken, its spread would potentially result in the deaths of millions of people worldwide. By the time this was recognized by the population, shortly after the first death in the US took place on February 29, 2020, there was general shock.

Hospitals in the initial epicenters of viral transmission were quickly inundated with patients, with healthcare workers strained to the breaking point, if not infected or killed due to inadequate or nonexistent protections. The overflow of morgues and digging of mass graves were becoming ubiquitous. These horrifying scenes in the US, Italy and throughout the world dominated public consciousness, with the expectation that the government would react and take the necessary measures to prioritize life.

But the only country in the world which initially implemented the necessary measures to save lives and protect the population was China. Mounting anger within the Chinese working class in January 2020 forced the government to pioneer the historic Zero-COVID policy in Hubei province on January 23, 2020, involving lockdowns, mass testing, rigorous contact tracing and other long established public health measures. Seventy-six days later, China emerged from lockdowns and resumed relatively normal life while maintaining vigorous test-and-trace policies for the following two-and-a-half years, before world imperialism pressured the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to scrap this life-saving policy, leading to 1-2 million deaths.

Outside of China, by mid-March 2020 the coronavirus was ripping through workplaces and schools in every metropolitan region of the globe. This prompted autoworkers, educators and other sections of the international working class to force the shutdown of nonessential workplaces and schools in order to save lives.

As the stock markets plunged on Wall Street and global financial centers, all efforts by the political establishment were directed towards bailing out the banks. Rather than implementing a systematic program to save lives and counteract the virus, the ruling elite’s main priority was saving capitalism and stopping the free-fall on Wall Street.

On March 22, 2020, the *New York Times* published an Op-Ed by its “imperial messenger” Thomas Friedman, coining the new mantra

for the back-to-work campaign: “The cure cannot be worse than the disease.” This campaign gained steam the following week after the passage of the CARES Act, which initiated the funneling of trillions of dollars to the rich while thousands of workers and retirees were soon dying every day.

The entire official narrative shifted from supposedly saving lives towards the rapid reopening of the economy. This coincided with the widespread promotion of the “herd immunity” policy of deliberate mass infection pioneered in Sweden. This pseudoscientific policy was based on the fraudulent claim that people, once infected with COVID-19, would be forever immune to the disease. Aside from its inhumane character, this made totally false assumptions about the virus, while ignoring the historical data on the wide-ranging consequences of infection with coronaviruses, as documented after the 2002-2004 SARS-CoV-1 outbreak.

Warmed-over eugenicist and fascistic conceptions were put forward, with a modern day “survival of the fittest” ethos permeating every speech and policy of Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro and their co-thinkers internationally. The modern promotion of Malthusianism acquired the character of a celebration of death.

In the US, the election of Joe Biden brought no fundamental change. Despite pledges to “follow the science,” Biden perpetuated the subordination of public health to the demands of Wall Street. The rollout of life-saving vaccines—which were a truly massive achievement of modern science—was subordinated to private profit and vaccine nationalism. To this day, the vast majority of people in low-income countries have never received two doses of anti-COVID vaccines, including 68 percent of Africans.

After initially pursuing a “vaccine-only” strategy and actively discouraging masking and other public health measures, in November 2021 the Biden administration greeted the emergence of the highly infectious and vaccine-resistant Omicron variant with undisguised glee. Over the subsequent period, it steadily dismantled the entire pandemic surveillance system, and by the following summer the White House explicitly adopted the “forever COVID” policy of unending mass infection, death and debilitation.

The bipartisan assault on science in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has crippled the field of public health, setting the stage for the next pandemic. Over the past year, the Biden administration did nothing to stop the spread of the H5N1 bird flu among dairy cattle, despite the fact that bird flu historically has a 50 percent fatality rate among humans.

Biden’s disastrous policies, including the normalization of mass death and debilitation from COVID-19, created the conditions for the return of Trump to the White House and the confirmation of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to head the 13 agencies of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Kennedy, the most notorious purveyor of anti-vaccine disinformation in the world, is already casting doubt on vaccines in response to the growing measles outbreak in Texas and the Southwest, which has killed two people so far.

Last week, the Senate held confirmation hearings for Jay Bhattacharya, Trump’s pick to head the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Well-known as a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration, the “herd immunity” manifesto, Bhattacharya was not questioned by a single Democrat about his criminal role during the pandemic.

The initial weeks of the second Trump administration have been marked by a series of alarming actions, including:

- The withdrawal of the US from the WHO, undermining global

efforts to track and respond to pandemics;

- An unprecedented gag order imposed on all 13 agencies within the HHS, suppressing vital public health information; and
- The firing of over 5,000 employees at HHS, the CDC, NIH, and FDA, targeting scientists and public health professionals.

A central aim of the Trump administration is to destroy Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, programs upon which tens of millions of Americans rely for their survival. This is the logical extension of the bipartisan pandemic policies aimed at culling the elderly and lowering life expectancy, which a recent study estimates has saved \$156 billion in social spending.

The pandemic revealed that the position of substantial sections of the ruling elite was that more people should have died. From that faction, represented in the US by Trump, the Republicans and their backers like fascist billionaire Elon Musk, the measures taken to save lives were seen as a missed opportunity to cull the elderly and slash expenditures on Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Throughout the pandemic, the *World Socialist Web Site* has waged a relentless struggle for scientific truth. We have exposed the lies of governments and the media, defended principled scientists against attacks, and championed a scientific policy of global elimination, the only viable strategy towards the pandemic. The Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the WWS, stands as a testament to our commitment to uncovering the truth and holding those responsible accountable.

The pandemic is by no means over. New variants continue to emerge, and the threat of new pathogens like bird flu looms large. This winter, the convergence of COVID-19 with other respiratory illnesses has once again overwhelmed healthcare systems, with over 20,000 Americans dying of seasonal flu. In this context, the WWS reiterates the following demands:

•For an immediate end to the “forever COVID” policy and the implementation of science-based public health measures! This includes universal masking, comprehensive testing and contact tracing, improved ventilation in all public spaces, and financial support for those affected by the pandemic.

•For a massive investment in research and development of next-generation vaccines and treatments! This must be coupled with a global effort to ensure universal access to these life-saving tools.

•For a fundamental reorganization of society based on socialist principles! This is the only way to ensure that public health is prioritized over private profit and that the needs of all people are met.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the incapacity of capitalism to deal with the problems of mass society, and that this social system is in an advanced state of regression. The working class must draw the necessary conclusions and take up the fight for a socialist future. This is the only path to ending the pandemic and building a world free from exploitation, oppression and preventable death.



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