

The MV Hondius hantavirus outbreak and the threat of another pandemic

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Six years after masses of people became aware of the COVID-19 pandemic following the horrific Diamond Princess cruise ship outbreak, a deadly outbreak of a far more lethal pathogen is unfolding aboard another cruise ship. And once again, the response of every relevant authority is to insist that the public has nothing to fear.

Eight cases of Andes virus hantavirus and three deaths have been confirmed aboard the Dutch-flagged MV Hondius, the first ship-borne cluster of the virus ever recorded. Thirty passengers have already disembarked across four continents—undoubtedly maskless on commercial flights—before authorities knew an outbreak was underway. On Thursday, news broke that a KLM flight attendant who had brief contact with one of the dying passengers has been hospitalized in Amsterdam with mild symptoms, the first potential secondary case outside the ship.

This strain of hantavirus carries a 38–40 percent case fatality rate, roughly 40 times that of COVID-19. There is no FDA-approved vaccine, no specific antiviral treatment, and an incubation period that can extend up to eight weeks before symptoms emerge. No one knows how many infections this cluster has already produced.

While of course a panic would not be beneficial in this situation, the facts that have emerged so far are highly disturbing and must be widely disseminated to the public in clear terms, with all necessary public health measures implemented. Yet amid this deepening crisis, the overriding concern of officials is not to inform the public, but to suppress information.

At a World Health Organization (WHO) emergency briefing May 7, Acting Director for Epidemic and Pandemic Management Maria Van Kerkhove confirmed human-to-human transmission aboard the Hondius “between the couple, the first and second cases, and also a medical doctor providing care,” then added: “This is not SARS-CoV-2. This is not the start of a COVID pandemic. This is an outbreak that we see on a ship.”

A May 6 joint CDC–State Department statement declared the risk to the American public “extremely low.” NIH

Director and Acting CDC Director Jay Bhattacharya, co-author of the October 2020 Great Barrington Declaration—the foundational document of the criminal “let it rip” policy—has held no press conference. The most prominent public US health figure to address the outbreak was Ashish Jha, Biden’s former White House COVID coordinator, who told NBC’s TODAY: “For the broader public, this is not a huge concern... This is not like COVID or flu, this is not going to become a major global outbreak.”

The sense of déjà vu is palpable. As with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, every official statement is a soporific, and nothing is being done to warn the public of the potential dangers.

An examination of the sequence of events that have led to this crisis exposes the catastrophic undermining of public health and scientific infrastructure that has taken place during the pandemic. Capitalist society is even less prepared today than it was in 2020.

The 24-day “Atlantic Odyssey” began April 1 in Ushuaia, Argentina, with the Hondius—operated by Oceanwide Expeditions with cabins from \$11,000 to \$17,000 per person—carrying 114 guests through Antarctica toward Cape Verde. The index (first) case, a Dutch man in his seventies, developed fever on April 6 and died aboard ship overnight on April 11.

The ship’s doctor took no samples and ordered no isolation. The captain told passengers the next morning: “Whatever health issues he was struggling with, I’m told by the doctor, were not infectious, so the ship is safe when it comes to that. The ship is safe.” The body was kept aboard for thirteen days while the itinerary continued. “We again kept eating all together,” a passenger later told AFP, “and we didn’t wear any masks.”

On April 24 the Hondius docked at Saint Helena, the site of Napoleon’s exile. The index case’s wife disembarked, was pushed past in a wheelchair, and boarded a flight to Johannesburg. She deteriorated mid-flight and died in Johannesburg on April 26. South Africa’s National Institute for Communicable Diseases confirmed hantavirus on April

27, sixteen days after the first death. By then 30 disembarkees had dispersed by commercial flight to twelve countries with no testing, no quarantine and no notification.

A German woman died aboard the Hondius on May 2. A British physician who cared for one of the cases is in intensive care. A Swiss passenger surfaced in Zurich twelve days after disembarking, identified only because Oceanwide eventually emailed disembarked passengers. The WHO was not informed under the International Health Regulations until May 2—three weeks after the first death and six days after the second. Returning passengers were given no isolation guidance. How far this has already spread, no one knows.

This disaster did not arise from the negligence of one ship's officers or one set of port authorities. It is the wreckage of six years of the deliberate dismantling of public health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a massive and ongoing social crime against the international working class.

World governments, acting on behalf of the financial oligarchy, refused the elimination strategy advocated by leading scientists and instead implemented policies of mass infection. The bipartisan campaign to declare the pandemic “over”—conducted while infections, deaths and Long COVID disability mounted into the hundreds of millions—is the conditioning operation that has made the Hondius response possible.

Since taking office, the Trump administration has accelerated this assault into the most concentrated attack on scientific and public-health infrastructure in US history. More than 20,000 workers have been fired across the Department of Health and Human Services since February. The National Institutes of Health budget has been cut from \$47 billion to \$27 billion. The STOP Spillover program, established to monitor zoonotic threats of which the Hondius cluster is a textbook example, was eliminated by executive order. The CDC's Vessel Sanitation Program, the sole US public-health institution oriented to cruise ships, was eliminated in April. The United States withdrew from the WHO in January, severing the formal IHR notification channels for outbreaks of exactly this kind. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an anti-vaccine quack installed at HHS to wage open war on modern medicine, recently declared that COVID only kills sick people.

The same fascistic war on science is unfolding internationally—Milei in Argentina, where this hantavirus emerged and where CONICET has been gutted; Meloni in Italy, the AfD in Germany. None of this began with Trump's second term. The Democratic Party, the Labour government in Britain, and social democratic parties across Europe have been junior partners in the assault on public

health for six years.

What must be done now? In every workplace, school, hospital, port and ship, the working class must act independently and raise the following demands:

- Immediate PCR and serology testing of every passenger, crew member, Saint Helena disembarkee and flight contact, with full public release of genomic sequencing.

- Educators, healthcare workers and transit workers must demand the safe deployment of HEPA filtration and Far-UVC (222 nm) air disinfection in every indoor public space.

- Every layoff at the CDC, NIH and HHS must be reversed; cruise inspection, zoonotic surveillance and pandemic preparedness must be restored on an emergency basis.

- The criminal “let it rip” policy must be ended, and the elimination of COVID-19, influenza and other airborne pathogens taken up as the demand of the working class against the ruling class that has refused it.

- Emergency action on climate change must be imposed against the financial oligarchy whose investments are driving accelerating zoonotic spillover.

This is not a call for panic. It is a call for the public to know what is happening, and for the working class to act on what its governments will not. Whether the Hondius cluster becomes the next pandemic cannot yet be known. What is certain is that the ruling class has demonstrated, over six years and counting, that it is structurally incapable of preventing pandemics, of arresting climate change which is increasing the threat of zoonotic spillover events, or of protecting the working class from the consequences of either.

Public health must be reorganized on a socialist basis—internationally coordinated, democratically planned, oriented to human needs rather than the profits of the financial oligarchy. This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party. The alternative is barbarism.



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