

Amid mounting COVID-19 death toll, White House demands businesses “open with a big bang”

9 April 2020

Tuesday and Wednesday were the worst two days of the coronavirus pandemic, both for the world as a whole and for the people of the United States, now an epicenter of the global crisis.

More than 1.5 million people have been infected by COVID-19 worldwide, with the death toll approaching 90,000. The national totals are horrific: nearly 18,000 dead in Italy, almost 15,000 in Spain and the United States, nearly 11,000 in France, more than 7,000 in Britain. Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands all have more than 2,200 dead.

On Wednesday, as a staggering 1,940 people succumbed in a single day in the US, there was a concerted campaign to create a new narrative, to downplay and deny reality. Despite the enormous and mounting death toll, every news report and statement from political officials was prefaced with declarations that there are “glimmers of hope” and that the fight against COVID-19 has “turned a corner.”

From the standpoint of the ruling elite, generating public concern over the pandemic has exhausted its usefulness. The COVID-19 crisis has been exploited to engineer a massive, multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the financial system.

The financial oligarchy has received a bailout even bigger than after the 2008 crisis, but this time in the course of weeks, not years. This has led to the most explosive growth in the stock market in American history. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has soared 25 percent in less than three weeks.

Having looted the treasury, the imperative of the ruling class is to send workers back to the job of producing profits. The most open advocate of prematurely opening businesses is President Donald Trump, speaking on behalf of powerful sections of the

financial oligarchy.

Trump declared Wednesday that it would be “nice to be able to open with a big bang, and I think we will do that soon. I would say we are ahead of schedule.” In order for that to happen, Trump said, “I think we have to be on the downside of the slope.”

The White House announced new guidance later in the afternoon on how “critical employees” would return to work after being exposed to COVID-19.

The document calls on workers to disregard World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on quarantines for those exposed to COVID-19, telling businesses that “workers may be permitted to continue work following potential exposure to COVID-19.”

The guidance defines “critical” workers so broadly as to encompass almost the entire working class: “Workers—including contracted vendors—in food and agriculture, critical manufacturing, informational technology, transportation, energy and government facilities.

“The guidelines are part of the government’s effort to ‘re-open’ the country,” NPR observed, “which has been brought to an economic halt due to the coronavirus and the extensive measures introduced to stem its spread.”

These guidelines guarantee that workers who have been exposed to COVID-19, and some of whom will develop infections, will pass on the disease to others, leading to unnecessary deaths.

In calling for an early reopening of the economy, Trump is acting contrary to the recommendation of global health officials. In a briefing Wednesday, WHO Regional Director Hans Kluge warned against any measures to prematurely reopen businesses. “Now is not the time to relax measures,” he said. “It is the time

to once again double and triple our collective efforts to drive towards suppression with the whole support of society.”

Kluge added, “Some positive signs from some countries do not yet represent victory—they offer a rare chance for us to tighten our grip on the virus.”

Throughout the pandemic, the WHO has made clear that social distancing measures, including widespread business closures, are only the first step in containing COVID-19.

“Large scale physical distancing, movement restriction, are in a sense a temporary measure. What they do is they slow down to some extent the spread of infection in communities and thereby take pressure off the healthcare system,” said WHO spokesperson Mike Ryan.

WHO officials have stated that it is inappropriate to open businesses under conditions where hospitals are saturated and huge portions of tests are returning positive, as is the case in the United States.

In a Monday briefing, Ryan stressed, “It would be very inadvisable to just lift [the] lockdown if the number of cases coming through the hospital is already at a level where your occupancy of beds is nearly at a hundred percent,” as it is in New York, Detroit, and other parts of the country.

He added, “You’ll see in somewhere like Korea, 2–6 percent of their samples are testing positive. Last week in New York 37 percent of tested samples were positive.”

And, in defiance of WHO recommendations, the United States has no facilities to care for COVID-19 patients, besides the extremely ill, leading them to attempt to recover at home, potentially infecting their family members.

But in one of the most egregious violations of global public health standards, the federal government announced Thursday that it would end federal support for COVID-19 testing sites around the country this week, leading some to shut down.

The media campaign over “glimmers of hope” is aimed at bypassing the extremely complex public health questions surrounding reopening sections of the economy, and instead equating modest successes caused by social distancing with the claim that the disease has been vanquished.

The efforts of the Trump administration and other

governments worldwide to open businesses—even as hospitals are saturated and there exists no systematic means for testing and quarantine—risks a disastrous resurgence of the disease. In the media and from the Trump administration, nothing is being said about the danger of a second wave.

It is urgently necessary to use the time bought by social distancing measures to massively expand public healthcare infrastructure and to ramp up testing, quarantine, and contact tracing capabilities.

The working class faces an irreconcilable class conflict. Thousands of workers have carried out strikes and protests over being forced to work under unsafe conditions with the spread of the coronavirus epidemic. It was this resistance that forced corporate America to accede to the shutdown of the auto plants, factories and many other work locations. The efforts by Trump and his Democratic Party accomplices to declare America “open for business” again, under conditions of a rising toll of infections and deaths, will trigger an enormous outpouring of social opposition.

In seeking to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, the demands of leading scientists and public health align with those of workers demanding safe workplaces, in opposition to capitalist governments and the demands of corporate and financial executives. The basic alternatives confronting mankind, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted last week, are the “capitalist profit system and death, or socialism and life.”

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