

Report to Seventh Congress of Socialist Equality Party (US)

The historical background of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fight for global elimination

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The following is a report given by Evan Blake on August 1 to the Seventh Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) in support of the resolution titled “The COVID-19 pandemic and the fight for socialism.”

Blake is a member of the National Committee of the SEP. Read the full report on the Congress and the resolutions adopted at it.

Revolutionary greeting to comrades throughout world. The fact that this is our second Congress and third summer event that we’ve had to hold online is incredible. The pandemic has remained a significant health risk for far longer than any of us initially expected.

This is an unprecedented, historical event that has impacted every person on the planet. There is not a country in the world where the word COVID is not recognized. From the beginning we’ve been the only political movement in the world that has taken the pandemic seriously, and today we are the only party that still recognizes the ongoing and, in fact, deepening dangers of the pandemic.

According to official figures, 582 million people have been infected with COVID-19 worldwide, including 93 million in the United States. But we know that the real level of infections is far higher.

This chart is from a seroprevalence study conducted by the CDC, which showed that by February 2022 almost 60 percent of the US population, or roughly 200 million people, had been infected with COVID-19. This included 75 percent of all children, or roughly 55 million kids, with a substantial surge from BA.1 which you can see from December to February.

Since February, with the spread of four more Omicron subvariants, the overall figure has likely increased to at least 75 percent of the US population, or 250 million people. If this figure were extrapolated for the world’s population outside China, likely somewhere from 4.5 to 5 billion people have actually been infected with COVID-19 at least once worldwide since the start of the pandemic.

According to the excess deaths tracker by *The Economist*, there have now been 22.2 million global excess deaths attributable to the pandemic, including 1.2 million in the US. In the span of just 2.5 years, COVID has killed as many people as died during the four years of World War I. If you take the estimate of 50 million deaths during World War II, then the rate at which people have died from COVID is roughly equal to the rates seen during the Second World War.

According to this tracker, every week 100,000-200,000 people are still dying worldwide due to the pandemic. This has gone down slightly in the past year due to vaccinations, but as you can see the Omicron BA.1 and BA.2 waves caused pronounced surges in excess deaths globally, and deaths from BA.5 are just beginning to show on this tracker.

When one looks at who has been killed by COVID, the overwhelming majority have been the elderly. In the US, over 760,000 people above 65 years old have died from COVID, or one in every 70 people in that age

group. Another 260,000 working age adults have been killed in the US.

Despite the endless lies that have been told about the impacts of COVID on children—which only our movement has made clear have always been intended to force the reopening of schools in order to send parents back to work—the number of child deaths from COVID has been horrific worldwide.

This chart from Greg Travis, whom we interviewed for the Global Workers’ Inquest, shows that just in the past year 1,300 children died from COVID in this country, making it the second leading cause of death by disease after all forms of cancer. In total, somewhere from 2,000 to 5,000 children have died from COVID in the US, and the global figure is now in the tens of thousands.

In addition, roughly 10 million children worldwide have lost a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, which is a staggering figure. In the US, over 200,000 children have lost a parent or primary caregiver, the majority under the Biden administration.

The emotional and psychological trauma inflicted by this level of death is enormous. This is a quote from an article by Ed Yong published in April, which I think indicates the scale of the grief that millions are now going through. Yong is a reporter at *The Atlantic* who won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting last year due to his coverage on the pandemic. He wrote:

Each American who has died of COVID has left an average of nine close relatives bereaved, creating a community of grievors larger than the population of all but 11 states. Under normal circumstances, 10 percent of bereaved people would be expected to develop prolonged grief, which is unusually intense, incapacitating, and persistent. But for COVID grievors, that proportion may be even higher, because the pandemic has ticked off many risk factors.

Deaths from COVID have been unexpected, untimely, particularly painful, and, in many cases, preventable. The pandemic has replaced community with isolation, empathy with judgment, and opportunities for healing with relentless triggers. Some of these features accompany other causes of death, but COVID has woven them together and inflicted them at scale.^[1]

If you extrapolate his figure globally, roughly 200 million close relatives are grieving the loss of their loved ones, and at least 20 million people worldwide are suffering from prolonged grief, with millions more grieving each month.

In addition to the profound impact of the 22 million deaths from

COVID, as we've noted, the pandemic is also a "mass disabling event" due to the ever-growing toll of Long COVID, which advocates have warned about since May 2020. As the resolution notes:

The chances of developing Long COVID are compounded with each reinfection and only slightly reduced by vaccination. In June, the US government officially acknowledged that roughly 20 million American adults were suffering from Long COVID, a figure that will continue to rise with each new wave of infections and reinfections. Extrapolated globally, there are likely over 400 million people worldwide now suffering from Long COVID, for which there remains no viable treatment.

Long COVID is a massive and deepening crisis which has horrific impacts on millions of people affected throughout the world. As shown in this graphic, it can affect nearly every organ in the body, and roughly a third of all Long COVID patients experience debilitating symptoms which prevent them from functioning normally at work or in their daily lives. Scientists have used the analogy of an iceberg to stress that in the long-term this will have vast consequences for society that we don't yet see.

As a result of the mass death and debilitation caused by the "let it rip" policies of the past 2.5 years, life expectancy has plummeted in countries throughout the world. Life expectancy is the gold standard by which one can measure societal progress, and the vast declines that have taken place globally are perhaps the most profound testament to the impact of the pandemic and the utterly reactionary character of world capitalism. The resolution states:

Coronavirus infection has also been linked to an increased risk of heart attack, stroke, a range of neurological disorders, kidney disease, diabetes, immune dysregulation and other life-altering or lethal after-effects. The combined impacts of mass death and debilitation have lowered life expectancy in the US by over 2 years since the start of the pandemic.

Worldwide, life expectancy has dropped by 1.6 years, the first global decline since the end of World War II. This immense social retrogression, long advocated by eugenicists such as Ezekiel Emanuel, is seen as a positive good by dominant sections of the ruling class for reducing pension obligations and other social welfare spending.

This year's Congress takes place amid the global surge of the Omicron BA.5 subvariant, which we've written on extensively on the site. This is by far the largest surge to take place during the summer in the Northern Hemisphere. The impacts of BA.5 across Europe have been terrible. Official deaths have surged in Portugal, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and other countries, while excess deaths are steadily rising in the UK and many other countries.

The case of New Zealand is particularly significant. At our August 22 webinar last year, in which Dr. Michael Baker participated, the virus was still eliminated in New Zealand and the country had only 27 deaths. But then the elimination strategy was abandoned by the Ardern government, and now we see the horrific results. The death toll is now at 2,212 and rising, as is the case in neighboring Australia, where physician Dr. David Berger faces state censorship for advocating a Zero-COVID policy.

As we've analyzed on the WSWS, the BA.5 surge has prompted a major shift in the Biden administration's pandemic policy. Just as BA.5 was becoming dominant, the decision was made to lift most COVID-19

security measures protecting Biden, thereby allowing him to become infected with the virus.

Over the past two weeks, Biden's infection was seized upon by the White House to openly proclaim what has been their unstated policy since the emergence of the Omicron variant: Everyone will be infected with COVID, repeatedly, year after year, forever.

This slide shows the quotes last week from White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and COVID Response Coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha, which are really quite remarkable. While they're now openly saying that COVID will never go away, they continue to conceal the disastrous implications of this "forever COVID" policy.

We pointed to some of these implications in our perspective on July 29 and will be writing on this further, but it's incredibly dire. Essentially, we're now in a situation where billions of people are being infected or reinfected throughout the world each year.

The death toll and the number of people suffering from Long COVID will continue to mount with each new variant, while each reinfection will increase one's chances of death, Long COVID or associated health risks. Rates of heart attacks, strokes, cardiovascular diseases, kidney disease, neurological disorders, neurodegenerative diseases, and more, will steadily rise, while life expectancy will continue to fall for the working class.

One of the central concerns of principled scientists is the inevitability of further viral evolution, which we've warned about since August 2020 before the vaccines were even approved and continually stressed in particular since the emergence of the Delta variant over a year ago. This is a visualization of the antigenic drift that's taken place with SARS-CoV-2, where we see how distinct the Omicron subvariants on the right-hand side are from the rest of the variants.

Under the current scenario, in which all mitigations have been lifted and the increasingly infectious and immune-resistant Omicron variants are allowed to spread entirely unchecked, the process of viral evolution is speeding up. The Biden administration's strategy, if you can call it one, now solely relies on existing vaccines and Paxlovid, which we're already seeing are losing their efficacy due to viral evolution.

These statements from Dr. Eric Topol, which we quoted in the July 29 perspective, elaborate on this critical issue that we've stressed over the past year, in particular, and completely refute the lies told by the Biden administration. Regarding Paxlovid, Dr. Topol stated:

We're going to see resistance to this drug, which, after the vaccines, is the second-most-important advance that we have had to take on the virus. But it may be short-lived, it could be that by year's end or the beginning of next year, we won't have Paxlovid as a remedy or rescue anymore^[2]

Commenting on a recent CDC study, which showed significant drops in the effectiveness of the vaccine in preventing hospitalizations from infections with BA.2 and BA.2.12.1 this spring, he stated:

To drop down almost 40 points in effectiveness against hospitalizations with only two shots—this should be a signal that something is going on with our vaccine protection. But you don't see anybody raising concerns about this. All you hear is happy talk that we have great protection from hospitalizations and deaths.^[3]

This data underscores the points raised by Eric Topol about the CDC study. On the left of this slide, we see the rise in child hospitalizations

throughout the pandemic, which have surged in recent weeks due to BA.5 and will rise even further in the coming weeks as schools fully reopen once again. On the right, you can see hospitalization rates for each age band, and there's also been a significant uptick in hospitalizations in the oldest age group at the top, those above 70 years old.

Comrade Benjamin Mateus and I also recently spoke with Dr. Arijit Chakravarty, the scientist from Fractal Therapeutics, that Benjamin interviewed extensively in May on the implications of "endemic" or "forever COVID." When we spoke, he raised many of the same points as Eric Topol, while also elaborating on other dangers of viral evolution. In the interview in May he noted this back-of-the-envelope calculation:

If the whole world was vaccinated tomorrow, and we spent just three years "learning to live with COVID" under the current strategy, we could well have over a billion people living with Long COVID.

Fractal Therapeutics is currently running complex models on this issue and trying to forecast the implications of "forever COVID" in terms of the toll that Long COVID and associated health risks will have in the coming years. When we spoke last week, he also raised these critical issues on the "forever COVID" policy, stating:

You turn your back on viral evolution at your own peril. The current public health response is ignoring viral evolution, and the virus could change the deal on us at any time. Their whole strategy relies on the goodwill of the virus.

He continued:

Repeated reinfection with COVID is being viewed only through the lens of the mortality and morbidity of the virus as it is now, but it's a moving target. If we expect the virus in the future to have similar properties, that's a very optimistic position. COVID remains a serious threat to our society for several reasons:

1) You could end up in a situation where along comes a variant with a much higher infection fatality ratio, and you don't know until the morgues start filing up. Because all precautions have been lifted, it remains a major unmitigated risk for some time.

2) Everybody gets COVID really often, and millions of people get at least a little messed up each time. If you do that for 5-10 years, what will be the cumulative impact? In doing risk assessment, one must always be conscious that a small hazard could turn into a great risk with increased frequency.

3) You could very easily have a situation where there are simultaneous pandemics of genetically distinct variants of the virus, as has been seen with dengue. If the virus continues to mutate as rapidly as it has, the density of COVID waves will keep getting tighter and tighter, and their frequency could increase.

These potential scenarios outlined by Dr. Chakravarty completely expose every claim made about "herd immunity" and the bankruptcy of the mitigationist and vaccine-only approaches.

It's important to recall that the outbreak of Omicron was positively welcomed by the Biden administration and other world governments, because they felt that they had something which would infect so many

people that it would send the virus into "endemicity." As we wrote, it was the embrace of "herd immunity" by the entire political establishment.

Once again, they were completely wrong and shortsighted. The more people are infected, the more the virus mutates. Their problem was that the virus was smarter than they are. Their strategy relies on the goodwill of the virus not to evolve, which is patently unscientific.

I'll come back to some of these issues at the end of my report and also go into the situation with monkeypox and what we can expect in the coming months. But I want to turn now to really focus on how this monumental tragedy has unfolded, including the historical background of the pandemic and the response of the ICFI. This is the focus of the third section of the resolution, which is really the core and most important section. It begins:

The record of the WSWS and ICFI on the pandemic is unparalleled and a triumph of the Marxist movement. Since January 2020, we have published over 5,000 articles on the pandemic, continuously alerting the international working class to the mounting global catastrophe and advocating for policies to eliminate SARS-CoV-2 globally.

From the beginning, the ICFI insisted that the pandemic was not simply a medical issue but primarily political, social and economic arising from the broader world capitalist crisis. The response to the pandemic would be determined by preexisting social conditions.

In the US, decades of unending war, financial parasitism, deindustrialization, the corporatist degeneration of the unions, the evisceration of democratic rights, and the cultivation of far-right politics embodied in the presidency of Donald Trump were the determining forces at the start of 2020.

One must ask: Why is it that the ICFI responded to the pandemic unlike any other political tendency in the world? What is it that prepared our movement to carry out such a vast, thoroughgoing analysis of this world historic event?

The most important aspect of our response to the pandemic has been the political and programmatic perspective that we have outlined for the international working class. The insights that we've made flowed directly from the preparatory work that was done during the 4th Phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement from 1986-2019. On this slide, I've listed some of the key gains that were made during this 33-year time period that are most relevant to our work on the pandemic:

- First, this period saw the renaissance of Trotskyism, rooted above all in internationalism and the fight for permanent revolution. This is the central significance of our coverage and the work of our party during the pandemic. It's always been guided by an internationalist perspective, proceeding from the world situation to the national.
- Second, the thoroughgoing analysis of globalization and the trade unions that we made beginning in the 1980s.
- Third, our analysis of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which set into motion a process of global counterrevolution to reverse all the social gains won by the working class in prior struggles.
- Fourth, the founding of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998.
- Fifth, our response to the 2008 financial collapse and its ramifications.
- Sixth, our continuous struggle for science and historical truth against the Frankfurt School, postmodernism, the 1619 Project and religious obscurantism, including the case of Terry Schiavo.
- And seventh, our hostility to Malthusianism, the pseudo-left, the Green parties and all other forms of petty-bourgeois politics.

During this time period, the 33 years from 1986 to 2019, every other political tendency in the world which claimed to be Marxist or Trotskyist

abandoned the working class and accommodated themselves to world capitalism and imperialism.

In contrast, the preparatory work and theoretical clarification that was done by the ICFI left us extremely well-positioned to respond to the pandemic. We immediately understood how disastrous this would be, due to the preexisting crisis of capitalism and the virtual destruction of the labor movement.

The question of public health and the fight for socialized medicine has always been central to the Marxist movement. One of the most critical elements of the pandemic is the way in which the centuries-long struggle for public health has been completely repudiated, especially in the United States but also throughout much of the world.

In effect, our work on the pandemic has more firmly established our connection to the past struggles of the Marxist movement for the expansion of public health and universal access to health care. Before turning to the work of the party during the pandemic, I'd like to briefly review some of this history.

Many comrades will be familiar with this, but one of the foundational texts of Marxism is Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which meticulously documents the working and living conditions of workers in England in the 1840s. The book had a profound impact on Marx and helped forge the relationship between the two founders of scientific socialism.

This is the most famous passage from the book in which Engels describes the way in which the capitalists, through the brutality of industrial production, gradually kill their workers in what he terms "social murder." These words apply with the same force to the policies of social murder committed throughout the pandemic. Engels writes:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains. I have now to prove that society in England daily and hourly commits what the workingmen's organs, with perfect correctness, characterise as social murder, that it has placed the workers under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long; that it undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time.^[4]

The development of public health in the US and internationally is a vast topic. There are many books on this, and we've highlighted in particular historian George Rosen's pioneering work *A History of Public Health*, which was written in 1958. In that book, Rosen describes public health in the following way:

History illuminates the public concern with health. Man is a social being. It is characteristic of human beings to associate with each other for mutual protection and advantage. Throughout known history, men living in communities have had to take account in one way or another of health problems that derive from the biological needs and attributes of their fellows.

Out of the need for dealing with these problems of social life, there has developed with increasing clarity a recognition of the signal importance of community action in the promotion of health and the prevention and treatment of disease. This recognition is summed up in the concept of public health.^[5]

Rosen himself is a fascinating figure. He went to medical school in Berlin in the early 1930s and witnessed the coming to power of Hitler. During that time, he studied works of classical Marxism and became essentially a social democrat, which saturates his works on the history of public health.

In this book, Rosen traces the development of public health from antiquity to the 1950s and its relationship to the class struggle. The central chapter is on the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the working class, which increasingly fought to improve its living and working conditions.

Comrades David North and Joseph Kishore went into these themes in this year's New Year statement, which is a foundational text. It summarizes the cumulative gains made in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, particularly in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, which spurred significant social reforms and the expansion of public health internationally, stating:

The state of public health is among the most critical indices of social progress and the overall condition of society...

The advances in public hygiene, the understanding of the human organism, the treatment of diseases, the recognition of the importance of an antiseptic environment to combat infections, the development of vaccines and antibiotics, the lowering of infant mortality and the rise in life expectancy—such achievements have been considered landmarks in the history of human civilization.

This fight for social progress found its highest expression in the Russian Revolution and the building of the first workers' state in history. This is a critical passage from the 1919 Program of the Russian Communist Party, which advanced a powerful commitment to develop public health. The Bolsheviks, then still under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, wrote:

The Russian Communist Party takes as the basis for its activity in the sphere of the protection of people's health, primarily, the carrying out of far-reaching health and sanitary measures, for the purpose of preventing the spread of disease.

The dictatorship of the proletariat has already rendered possible the introduction of a number of measures in the domain of public health and medical service which were impossible under capitalism, such as nationalization of drug stores, big privately owned hospitals and health resorts, the introduction of obligatory labor for doctors, etc.

Accordingly, the Russian Communist Party sets itself the following immediate tasks:

(1) The determined application of wide measures of sanitation in the interests of the toilers, such as:

- (a) Improvement of sanitary conditions of inhabited areas (protection of soil, water and air).
- (b) Organization of public catering on scientific and hygienic lines.
- (c) Adoption of measures to prevent the outbreak and spread of infectious diseases.
- (d) Introduction of sanitary legislation.
- (2) To combat social diseases (tuberculosis, venereal diseases, alcoholism, etc.).
- (3) Free and skilled medical treatment and medicines to be accessible to all.^[6]

This is just one component of the revolutionary program of the Russian Communist Party, written exactly 100 years before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 in late 2019. The essential elements of this are present in this year's resolution on the pandemic and have been expressed in our writings over the past 2.5 years.

Despite the bureaucratic degeneration under Stalin, there were significant achievements by the Soviet Union in the field of public health. In the 1960s, malaria was eliminated, and there were major efforts to eliminate tuberculosis and other infectious diseases.

Significantly, it was the Soviet Union's Deputy Minister of Health, the virologist and epidemiologist Viktor Zhdanov, who in 1958 first called on the World Health Assembly to undertake a global initiative to eradicate smallpox which was accepted the following year.

Despite the historic achievements in public health that arose directly or indirectly from the Russian Revolution, the field has always been hampered by a severe lack of funding, the subordination of the health care and pharmaceutical industries to private profit, and the nationalist interests of the imperialist powers.

While the US and many European countries eliminated yellow fever, babesiosis, malaria and polio in the 20th century, followed by measles, rubella and diphtheria earlier this century, smallpox remains the only infectious disease eradicated globally. Even this historic achievement only developed through the immense international efforts of scientists and public health departments with minimal funding, often in conflict with various national governments.

Each of the pathogens previously eliminated in the advanced capitalist countries, as well as many other infectious diseases, could quickly be eradicated worldwide under a planned socialist economy in which social needs and public health take precedence over corporate profits and gargantuan military budgets.

As with all elements of human progress, private ownership of the means of production and the division of the world into rival nation-states are the fundamental barriers blocking the global elimination or eradication of numerous pathogens, including SARS-CoV-2.

After the eradication of smallpox in 1980, developments in public health effectively came to a halt. The ascendancy of Reagan and Thatcher, the rabid promotion of individualism and, above all, the dissolution of the Soviet Union set the stage for decades of unrelenting social counterrevolution and the steady erosion of public health.

While every field of science has undergone extraordinary advancement over the past four decades, the profound social retrogression of this period of capitalist decline has severely undermined public health.

The disastrous response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has now killed an estimated 36.3 million people worldwide since 1981, marked a significant turning point in this process. As is now taking place with monkeypox, HIV/AIDS was initially branded as a "gay disease." It was allowed to become entrenched throughout much of the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where as we see here the death rate remains incredibly high.

This slide shows the cumulative number of children who have been orphaned by AIDS worldwide, as well as some of the worst impacted countries in Africa. As with COVID-19, the trauma inflicted on millions of young people is immense.

Following the AIDS pandemic, after the turn of the century there was a series of new infectious diseases that nearly became catastrophic pandemics: the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak; the 2003 H5N1 "bird flu" epidemic; the 2009 H1N1 "swine flu" pandemic; the 2012 MERS outbreak; the 2014 uptick in polio cases in Africa and Asia; the 2014–2016 Ebola virus epidemic, the 2015-2016 Zika outbreak and the 2018-2020 Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Despite the publication of hundreds of scientific papers, news articles, books and even films stressing the need for world governments to prepare for future pandemics, global society was entirely unprepared for the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in late 2019. Throughout this time period, the WSWS wrote on each of these outbreaks and pandemics, underscoring the lack of preparation for the next infectious diseases to come.

Our intense focus on the pandemic is one of the strategic decisions in the history of the ICFI, flowing from those made over the past century and, in particular, since the split with the WRP. Our response to the pandemic and the shifts in the work of the party during the past 2.5 years are perhaps the most profound expression of the 5th Phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement.

In Comrade North's lecture at the 2019 Summer School, he noted that the 5th Phase will see the growing intersection of the party with the revolutionary struggles of the working class, which will be facilitated through the emergence of new technologies that have revolutionized communications.

Over the past two years, we've organized numerous online public meetings on the pandemic, as well as the Global School Strike and other critical struggles by workers internationally. We've assisted workers in forming rank-and-file safety committees in numerous industries throughout the world to fight against the homicidal pandemic policies.

The most fundamental achievement has been our continuous analysis and the development of our perspective at each and every turn, which is the primary focus of the upcoming books on the pandemic that we're publishing in August, which will be titled *COVID, Capitalism and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*.

The book is a compilation of the most critical statements we've published on the pandemic and is essential reading to understand the pandemic and the response of our movement. It documents the key turning points and concepts that we've elaborated, some of which are summarized here:

- Malign neglect
- The role of the class struggle in forcing global lockdowns
- The CARES Act and other financial bailouts
- "Herd immunity" and the back-to-work campaign
- Our May Day 2020 rally and the concept of a "trigger event"
- The betrayals of the unions, which prompted the rapid growth of rank-and-file committees
- Biden's election and the January 6 coup
- The struggle against school reopenings
- The global devastation of the Delta variant
- The three pandemic strategies: herd immunity, mitigation, elimination-eradication
- Our August & October 2021 WSWS webinars
- The Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Omicron and the collapse of the mitigationist strategy
- The new reality of "endemic" or "forever COVID"

Our first article on COVID-19 was published on January 24, 2020, a news report by Comrade Benjamin Mateus on the situation in China. Four days later, Comrade Bryan Dyne wrote our first perspective on the

outbreak in China, titled “The Wuhan coronavirus outbreak and the global threat of infectious diseases.” We continued to publish news updates throughout February 2020, while the politicians, as well as virtually the entire corporate media, remained completely silent as the virus spread globally.

On February 28, 2020, we issued our first ICFI statement on the coronavirus, which called for a globally coordinated mobilization of public health resources in order to eradicate the virus. This was the first of numerous statements calling for eradication throughout 2020 and to the present. Other statements from the SEP (US) during this time developed these themes and charted a clear strategy that would have stopped the pandemic in its tracks if we had been in power.

In the February 28, 2020 ICFI statement, we wrote:

The solution must be global. Scientists from all over the world must be allowed to share their research and technology, unencumbered by the “national interests” and geopolitical conflicts that serve only to delay the development of effective countermeasures to contain, cure, and ultimately eradicate the coronavirus...

Hundreds of billions of dollars must be immediately allocated to ensure universal access to the highest-quality medical care for all those infected with the virus. An international team of health care experts and scientists must be assembled to coordinate care wherever there are outbreaks...

The provisioning of health care and treatment cannot be regulated by the insurance, pharmaceutical and health care companies. Treatment, including any future vaccine, must be available to everyone, free of charge, on an equal basis. The giant health care companies must be turned into public utilities, democratically controlled to meet the urgent social needs presented by the coronavirus and other health emergencies.

Throughout March 2020, we continuously analyzed the disastrous response of capitalist governments, above all, the US, and we coined the term “malign neglect” to summarize this refusal to implement basic public health measures.

In this statement by Comrades Alex Lantier and Andre Damon, we wrote:

In the face of this mounting disaster, a massive chasm exists between the severity of the situation and the response of world governments.

On the surface, this response appears to be chaotic, disorganized and improvised. All of this is true. But out of this chaos a definite policy emerges which can be defined as “malign neglect.” That is, governments are making a deliberate decision to minimize their response, to adopt an attitude of indifference to the spread of the virus.

In opposition to the malign neglect of the ruling elites, we spearheaded the fight by the working class to force lockdowns, above all, among autoworkers where our statements directly led to wildcat strikes that shut down the auto industry in North America.

This SEP statement calling for the shutdown of the auto industry was read by thousands of workers throughout the Detroit Metro area and precipitated the shutdown of factories across North America, which then only the WSWS properly covered.

We immediately understood the significance of the CARES Act and other global financial bailouts, as well as Thomas Friedman’s mantra “the cure cannot be worse than the disease,” which initiated the global back-to-work campaign, and we wrote on these issues continuously beginning in late March.

The statements from this time period are remarkable and a powerful testament to the renaissance of Trotskyism during the 4th Phase. This slide shows the strong correlation between the rise of the Dow and the COVID death toll throughout 2020, which continued through 2021 up until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

We issued scathing denunciations of the criminal response of the Trump administration, which was later revealed to have continuously lied to the public beginning in January 2020.

This was a critical statement from April 7, 2020 by Comrades Joe Kishore and David North, which clearly explained the objective forces driving the back-to-work campaign. We wrote:

In the final analysis, the edifice of fictitious capital—wealth created through the massive and inflationary expansion of credit and debt—cannot be entirely liberated from a real productive process involving and requiring the exploitation of the labor power of the working class. If that real process stops, for whatever reason, the structure of fictitious capital collapses...

The class conflict and the logic of the opposing classes are starkly posed: For the ruling class, it is a question of securing its wealth, returning the workers to the job under unsafe conditions, and tearing up whatever remains of social programs. For the working class, it is a question of saving lives, stopping all nonessential production, and restructuring economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit...

One path leads to authoritarianism, the other leads to socialist revolution. This is the irrepressible social and political logic of the fundamental reality of our epoch: the global crisis and death agony of world capitalism.

The pandemic was the central focus of the 2020 May Day rally, where Comrade North characterized it as a “trigger event” in world history, which would act upon the preexisting contradictions of capitalism and set into motion processes leading to world war and revolution.

As we note in the resolution, this perspective has been entirely vindicated. At the May Day rally, comrades also gave powerful reports on the disastrous responses in Turkey, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Australia and across Europe.

This was a very significant statement published on May 21, 2020, which we wrote after a meeting with close autoworker contacts, in which Comrade Benjamin Mateus played a leading role. We wrote:

The coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads through liquid droplets when people talk, breathe, cough or sneeze. People are infected when virus particles enter their mouths, noses or eyes through direct transmission or after touching a surface where the particles have fallen.

Scientists have shown that the pathogen is also present in tiny airborne particles, known as aerosols, which can be suspended in the air for longer periods and travel much further than the recommended six feet of social distancing. The distance that the virus can travel is also affected by how loudly someone is speaking.

I think this passage, which notes the role of airborne transmission, highlights the fact that on every critical scientific issue related to the pandemic, we were ahead of the curve and following the most advanced and far-sighted scientists.

This comes through clearly in the 2020 volume of the book, but from a very early stage we were reporting on and warning about the need for comprehensive paid lockdowns, mass testing and contact tracing, the role of airborne transmission, the dangers of school reopenings, the impact of Long COVID, the potential for viral evolution and more.

The work done by Comrade Benjamin Mateus on these topics has been remarkable, but also Comrades Bryan Dyne, Andre Damon, Philip Guelpa, Frank Gaglioti and other writers internationally, and this finds expression in major articles on each of these topics in the pandemic book.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Then there was the 2020 Congress, which assessed the opening months of the pandemic and further developed the concept of the “trigger event.” This quote from that resolution is a very prescient warning that the vaccines would not resolve the pandemic. We wrote:

“How long will it be until the pandemic is brought under control?” This is a question being asked by billions of people. The usual response is that the pandemic will continue until an effective vaccine is developed. This fatalistic answer is premised on the assumption that the COVID-19 crisis is almost exclusively a medical problem. What is left out are the social and political dimensions of the fight against the pandemic. As the uprising of the working class was necessary to bring an end to World War I, the class-conscious intervention of the working class, in a struggle against capitalism, is necessary to create the conditions for an effective social response to the disease. Even if a vaccine is developed in the near future, and even if it provides long-term immunity, which is not guaranteed, its distribution will be subject to the profit interests of the corporations and the geostrategic conflicts between the major capitalist powers. Moreover, the pandemic’s containment will not bring the social and economic crisis to a conclusion. As was the case in the aftermath of World War I, the pandemic will leave deep scars and have long-lasting consequences. There will be no return to the conditions, as bad as they already were, that existed before its outbreak. The economic, social and political crisis will develop on the basis of the conditions created by the pandemic. The scope and intensity of the class struggle will increase, not diminish.

Coming out of the Congress, our party played a leading role in the struggles against school reopenings that fall in hundreds of cities worldwide. We helped educators build rank-and-file committees throughout the world. In opposition to the *New York Times* and the entire corporate media, we rooted ourselves in science and the numerous studies which showed as early as May 2020 the major role that schools play in viral transmission.

We continuously drew the connections between the pandemic and the promotion of the far right, which found its sharpest expression under Trump in the US. We exposed the Great Barrington Declaration and the open adoption of “herd immunity” by Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, Modi and other world leaders.

Throughout the fall and winter of 2020, we published numerous

perspectives and statements about the disastrous surge that was unfolding and the need for immediate lockdowns while the vaccines were being rolled out. This policy would have saved millions of lives globally in just those months alone.

Upon Biden’s inauguration, the struggle against school reopenings once again became central to the class struggle in the US, as his main domestic policy commitment was to fully reopen schools in all Democrat-led cities where remote learning had still been in place. This was initially centered in Chicago, where Mayor Lori Lightfoot threatened a PATCO-style mass firing of rank-and-file teachers rebelling against the efforts by the pseudo-left Chicago Teachers Union to send them back to work.

Once the CTU betrayal was pushed through, this opened the door for the full reopening of schools in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Oakland and every other Democrat-led city, which was disastrous that spring and even more so the following fall semester, killing hundreds of children across the US.

From late March to mid-May 2021, we had near-daily coverage of the Delta surge in India, which remains the worst surge to have happened anywhere in the world during the pandemic. An estimated over 2 million people were killed in India during those two months alone.

May Day 2021 again focused on the pandemic and centered on the founding of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which anticipated a significant growth of the class struggle over the past year. The founding statement of the IWA-RFC stressed the significance of the pandemic and the role of rank-and-file committees in organizing opposition to the homicidal policies, which we have to further develop going forward.

Our summer school in the US last year featured reports from Comrade Benjamin Mateus on the state of the pandemic and the historical lessons of the 1918 influenza pandemic, as well as from Comrade Andre Damon on the Wuhan Lab lie, which only our party has continuously reported on and exposed.

Coming out of the 2021 summer school, we made a significant advance in our perspective through the statements on elimination-eradication and the two major public events we hosted with scientists. As we note in the resolution, this was a turning point and real clarification for our movement. With the roll-out of vaccines, there were growing pressures internationally throughout 2021 to adopt a reformist mitigationist perspective towards the pandemic.

We correctly opposed this and made clear that unless SARS-CoV-2 is eliminated globally it will not gradually evolve into a benign illness but rather could evolve into evermore dangerous variants, causing wave after wave of mass infections and deaths. This perspective has been entirely vindicated.

It is now clear that the bourgeois-imperialist position was herd immunity. The middle class reformist position was mitigation, an attempt to negotiate with the virus. And the revolutionary position is to eliminate the virus globally. This is summarized in this passage from the statement, which is also in this year’s Congress resolution:

Mitigation is to epidemiology what reformism is to capitalist politics. Just as the reformist harbors the hope that gradual and piecemeal reforms will, over time, lessen and ameliorate the evils of the profit system, the mitigationists nourish the delusion that COVID-19 will eventually evolve into something no more harmful than the common cold. This is a pipe dream totally divorced from the science of the pandemic.

In reality, as long as the virus spreads it will continue to mutate into new, more infectious, lethal and vaccine-resistant variants that threaten all of humanity. Unless it is eradicated on a world scale, the embers of COVID-19 will continue to burn and create the conditions for the virus to flare up anew.

At the same time as we forged new relationships with leading scientists, last summer and fall we deepened our connections with the working class, which found its most advanced expression in the global school strikes that we organized with Lisa Diaz, a parent in the UK, and the further development of rank-and-file committees.

These processes came together in the October 24 webinar, which was a historic event viewed by thousands of workers in over 100 countries. At the conclusion of the October 24 webinar, David North referred to Karl Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach, "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

Paraphrasing this and applying it to the pandemic, he stated, "The scientists have explained the pandemic, they have shown how it is transmitted and how that transmission can be stopped. But the challenge of the working class is to end it."

Coming out of that webinar on November 20, 2021, we launched the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, just four days before the emergence of the Omicron variant. It has now been just over eight months since that critical week, which was one of the most significant turning points in the pandemic. I'll come back to the Inquest shortly.

Throughout the first Omicron surge, we documented the abandonment of all mitigation measures and the universal adoption of herd immunity.

As I noted earlier, the New Year statement written by Comrades David North and Joe Kishore marked a significant advance in our analysis of the pandemic, rooting it above all in the history of public health, the Russian Revolution and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This is another critical passage from that statement:

The experience of the past two years demonstrates that the end of the pandemic will be achieved not merely through medical measures. The way out of what is fundamentally a social crisis demands a political struggle for the reorganization of the world on a different economic and social foundation.

All appeals to the capitalist state for a change of policy will fail. The implementation of a scientifically guided and progressive response to the pandemic is possible only to the extent that these policies find the necessary social foundation in a mass movement of the working class on a global scale.

Throughout this period, we continuously exposed all efforts to falsify and cover up data on COVID, in the US and internationally. We remain the only outlet that has seriously reported on the HHS scrapping its data collection from hospitals, including daily death figures, as well as the CDC's unexplained slashing of over 72,000 COVID deaths from its Data Tracker website.

This year we've also formed connections with a new layer of scientists internationally, many of whom we've interviewed for the website or for the Inquest, including Nicolas Smit, Greg Travis, and Drs. Ellie Murray, Stephen Griffin, Guy Marks, David Berger, Lidia Morawska, Lucas Ferrante, Arijit Chakravarty and others.

This quote from the resolution summarizes the key work that we've done so far on the Inquest. We write:

The Inquest has already made significant inroads. It has received testimony from scientists and anti-COVID activists on the topics of the Zero-COVID strategy in China, airborne transmission, masking policies, Long COVID, the role of schools in viral transmission, the impact of COVID-19 on children and more.

Experts have testified on the criminal policies of governments

and corporations in the US, Canada, Brazil, UK, Sweden, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and India. We have interviewed workers in a range of industries, including autoworkers, educators, health care workers, musicians and more. The investigation is deepening and will present its initial findings later this year.

The Inquest has already gathered an enormous amount of information, and it's clearly pointing towards a massive indictment of the capitalist response to the pandemic, which amounts to a series of ever-deepening crimes on a world scale. The Inquest was announced last November, less than a year ago, and it remains to this day the only systematic attempt to examine the pandemic in its broader social and political dimensions, which is really critical.

Going forward, we have to deepen the work of the Inquest internationally, with an emphasis on bringing forward the experiences of workers. The interview that Comrades Jerry White and James Brewer did with the family of Catherine Pace, a Detroit autoworker who died from COVID, should be seen as a model for this, and we need to identify workers in each industry that we plan to interview.

This was just a brief review of our work on the pandemic, which again is a staggering achievement of our international movement. At every turn, we've charted a fighting strategy and tactics for the international working class in general, as well as specifically for workers in the most critical industries—autoworkers, educators, logistics and healthcare workers throughout the world; transit workers in the UK; plantation workers in Sri Lanka and more. Over the past two years we've interviewed and given voice to the experiences of workers in all of these industries and more.

We are the only political party in the world that has provided the most advanced scientists a means to speak publicly. We have proven in practice the revolutionary character of our movement. In the most profound sense, the pandemic is proof of the unviability of the existing social system and our response demonstrates that our party is leading the working class on all the great issues.

As we note in the resolution, the monkeypox pandemic is now spiraling out of control alongside the deepening COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, there are now over 22,000 cases in over 75 non-endemic countries throughout the world. The response of the WHO and most national governments has been disastrous and there's been a propaganda effort to prematurely declare monkeypox endemic, which is completely false.

I'm going to show a couple photos of monkeypox, because I think it's important for comrades to understand just how horrific this virus is and the implications of its continued spread.

As we've covered on the WSWS and comrades have likely seen on social media, it is a terrible illness which can be incredibly painful. In almost every post on social media, the patient says that it's the most painful thing they've ever experienced. The infection fatality ratio is lower than smallpox, but the symptoms are very similar as it's in the same family of orthopoxviruses.

What we're seeing with monkeypox is the further normalization of intense pain, death, and further pandemics, all of which disproportionately impact the working class. In the case of monkeypox, a safe and effective vaccine exists and you can be sure that the rich have secured access for themselves.

Deaths are a lagging indicator, but just this week we've seen the first 4 confirmed deaths outside of Africa. This morning, a 22-year-old man in India died from the disease, following two deaths in Spain and one in Brazil earlier this week, a 41-year-old man.

It still has to be determined what the dominant mode of transmission is for this unprecedented global outbreak—whether through aerosols, droplets, fomites, or skin-to-skin contact—but the virus is clearly spreading

more rapidly than ever before on a world scale. It's important to stress that patients can be infectious for up to 3-4 weeks and should be isolating throughout that time, but we know from COVID that they won't allow even 5 days' isolation.

It's already begun to spread through college campuses across the US and it will begin spreading more rapidly through K-12 schools in the coming weeks and months. Historically, monkeypox has had disproportionate impacts on children, who are also not eligible for the vaccine.

In response to this growing disaster, which takes place simultaneously with the surge of BA.5, we should anticipate another upsurge of the class struggle among teachers, parents, students, and industrial workers, with renewed calls for school and factory closures to stop the spread of monkeypox and COVID.

Lastly, I'd like to speak briefly on the topic of climate change. These are three heat maps showing the extreme heat that we've seen across the Northern Hemisphere over the past month. The maps on the top left and on the right are from last week, while the map of Spain is from July 14. These extreme temperatures can cause permanent damage to agricultural areas, threatening to further disrupt the global food supply.

As we note in the resolution, the refusal of capitalist governments to address climate change has created a nightmare scenario where ecosystems throughout the world are rapidly collapsing. This summer's heat waves, historic flooding and wildfires are becoming evermore frequent. This year's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report underscores the disastrous impacts that climate change has already had. It notes:

Widespread, pervasive impacts to ecosystems, people, settlements, and infrastructure have resulted from observed increases in the frequency and intensity of climate and weather extremes, including hot extremes on land and in the ocean, heavy precipitation events, drought and fire weather (high confidence)...

Climate change has caused substantial damages, and increasingly irreversible losses, in terrestrial, freshwater and coastal and open ocean marine ecosystems (high confidence). The extent and magnitude of climate change impacts are larger than estimated in previous assessments (high confidence).

Widespread deterioration of ecosystem structure and function, resilience and natural adaptive capacity, as well as shifts in seasonal timing have occurred due to climate change (high confidence).^[7]

The report notes that an estimated 3.3 to 3.6 billion people "live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change." By 2050, over 1 billion people currently living in low-lying areas of coastal cities will face growing threats from floods. By the end of the 21st century, 50 to 75 percent of the world's population could experience "life-threatening climatic conditions" due to unbearable heat and humidity.

This study, published in April, is by far the largest study done on the issue of the connection between climate change and zoonotic spillover events between species. It found that climate change will dramatically increase the potential for viruses that already exist among animal populations to be spread to humans, as happened with SARS-CoV-2, HIV, Ebola and other viruses.

Their models project that the warming of the planet will likely cause the displacement of over 3,000 mammal species over the next 50 years. This geographic displacement will bring together species that have their own unique endemic viruses, causing a mixture between them and the possibility of spillovers into neighboring human populations.

This map shows the regions of the world where these spillover events are forecast to take place. The study does not project how many viruses will ultimately cause disease in humans, but the potential is very significant. As with the pandemic, the ruling elites are doing nothing to stop climate change.

To conclude my report, there is a profound objective significance to the work that we've done on the pandemic, which is a demonstration of both revolutionary theory and practice. Going forward, we have to deepen our analysis of the pandemic, our fight for global elimination, and our efforts with the Inquest to uncover and document all the crimes that have taken place and are ongoing.

We have to think creatively about how to scientifically and politically educate workers on global elimination, which remains within reach but requires the revolutionary overthrow of the profit system.

As we see in this chart, China has proven once again that elimination is possible, even with more infectious variants. This chart shows the number of daily infections in Shanghai and across China from March 1 to August 1, by which point the outbreak of the Omicron BA.2 subvariant had been contained.

This chart shows the daily new deaths from COVID-19 across China during the same time period, which peaked at just over 50 deaths per day. There haven't been any deaths since late May. During that same time period, from March 1 to August 1, 73,000 Americans had officially died from COVID.

The containment of BA.2 was an extraordinary achievement which reaffirmed that Zero-COVID and global elimination are possible. But the worsening outbreaks that have happened in China underscore that it must be expanded to every country.

If the forces of production were in the grasp of the international working class, COVID-19 could be eliminated worldwide by the beginning of fall. That is a powerful objective truth which only our movement articulates.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, we recognized that this global crisis could not be solved except through the subordination of profit to social interests, which we knew the bourgeoisie would never accept. Because it is a great social question, it can only be solved by the working class. It is a global, historical social crisis, and it is implicitly revolutionary.

For decades, we had foreseen that there would be some sort of event that would profoundly destabilize global society and set into motion processes that would radicalize the international working class. In the opening months of the pandemic we saw that this was such a "trigger event."

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which threatens to plunge mankind into a nuclear Third World War, arose out of the pandemic and the 30 years of unending imperialist violence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These immense world crises—the pandemic and the war—have caused the worst inflationary crisis in decades, massively eroding workers' living standards globally.

As we'll discuss later this week, the international working class is entering into great struggles against these intolerable conditions. Our task is to infuse this growing movement with a revolutionary socialist perspective, rooted in the history of Trotskyism, and fighting to end the war, stop the pandemic and rebuild global society based on the principle of social equality. Thank you, comrades.



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