

# As General Motors demands profits, ventilator shortage in US threatens tens of thousands of lives

28 March 2020

In cities throughout the United States, hospitals are approaching capacity as the number of people infected with COVID-19 doubles every two days. On Friday, the number of cases topped 100,000, after nearly 20,000 new cases were reported. More than 250 people died, bringing the total number of deaths to over 1,500.

Meanwhile doctors and nurses are faced with a nationwide shortage of protective gear and health-care equipment.

The shortage of lifesaving ventilators is rapidly emerging as a central factor that will vastly increase the death toll from the coronavirus.

In Metro Detroit, which is rapidly emerging as a center of the pandemic in the US, Henry Ford Health System warned patients that “because of shortages,” those who are “extremely sick” may be “ineligible for ICU or ventilator care.” Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan (a former health-care executive) praised the letter yesterday, declaring, “what they put out is honest.”

Other health-care systems are preparing even more horrific measures. The states of Washington and Alabama are activating statutes that would allow them to deny lifesaving care to the mentally disabled.

A lawsuit filed by the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program noted that the state’s emergency plan for ventilator rationing “specifically singles out and excludes certain people with intellectual disabilities from access to ventilators in the event of rationing... Hospitals are ordered to ‘not offer mechanical ventilator support for patients’ with ‘severe or profound mental retardation,’... This policy also applies to children.”

Within days, medical professionals will be living their worst nightmare, forced to determine who lives and who dies.

Trump’s claim that “nobody in their wildest dreams would have ever thought that we’d need tens of thousands of ventilators” is an outright lie. In fact, innumerable reports and articles from epidemiologists, health-care professionals and even government agencies have made precisely such warnings.

A 2003 report from the Government Accountability Office warned that “few hospitals have adequate medical equipment, such as ventilators that are often needed for respiratory infections.” In 2005, the Department of Health and Human Services published a Pandemic Influenza Plan noting that “in a severe pandemic it is possible that shortages, for example of mechanical ventilators, will occur...”

In June 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a report from epidemiologists, “Stockpiling Ventilators for Influenza Pandemics,” that stated: “Substantial concern exists that intensive care units (ICUs) might have insufficient resources to treat all persons requiring ventilator support. Prior studies argue that current capacities are insufficient to handle even moderately severe pandemics...”

However, the federal government, under both Democrats and Republicans, did nothing. The amount spent on the military *every year* over the past two decades is more than 50 times what it would have cost to build a national stockpile of one million ventilators. To produce such a stockpile would have cost about \$15 billion, a minuscule fraction of what was used to bail out the banks.

Now, in the face of a critical ventilator shortage, major corporations see the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to generate enormous profits through price gouging and profiteering.

On Friday, the *New York Times* reported that plans by

General Motors to produce ventilators fell through because the Trump administration balked at the price demanded by the company.

The move “came after the Federal Emergency Management Agency said it needed more time to assess whether the estimated cost was prohibitive. That price tag was more than \$1 billion, with several hundred million dollars to be paid upfront to General Motors.” GM reported profits of \$6.5 billion last year.

The *Times* added, “The \$1.5 billion price tag comes to around \$18,000 a ventilator. And the overall cost, by comparison, is roughly equal to buying 18 F-35s, the Pentagon’s most advanced fighter jet.”

GM subsequently announced that it would go ahead with producing the ventilators, in partnership with medical device company Ventec.

For its part, the Trump administration refrained for weeks from invoking the Defense Production Act to enforce the production of ventilators and other equipment because it did not want to impose any demands on the corporations. On Friday, Trump announced that he would utilize the act to “compel” GM to do something it had already pledged to do.

With parts in short supply, almost none of the ventilators will be available for the massive expansion of demand expected in the next two months. The *Times* noted that “the overall boost will not have a major effect until early summer, industry executives said—perhaps in time for a ‘second wave’ of infections.”

As the Trump administration and the auto giant haggle over how much will be paid and how much GM will profit, people are dying.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the conversion of all major corporations, including the gigantic health-care and manufacturing companies, into public utilities, under democratic control. All resources must be made available not for bailing out the corporations and buying up the assets of Wall Street investors, but to an emergency program to produce ventilators and other equipment and build hospitals.

To the extent that private property gets in the way of saving lives, it must be swept aside. The vast technological and scientific advances and the enormous productive forces of humanity must be freed from the constraints placed on them by the profit motive and the nation-state system.

Every serious effort to deal with this coronavirus crisis, and to prepare for it, has been sabotaged by private ownership of the means of production. This is the basic issue: whether economic life is directed by the ruling elite on the basis of profit and the accumulation of wealth, or whether it is directed by the working class on the basis of social need. Capitalism or socialism.

We call on all workers and young people to join the Socialist Equality Party today and take up this fight.

Andre Damon

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