

As COVID-19 death toll rises, the ruling classes agitate for a premature return to work

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Public health officials and doctors in the US are warning that thousands of people infected by the Covid-19 virus will die this week. “This is going to be our Pearl Harbor moment, our 9/11 moment, only it’s not going to be localized,” Surgeon General Jerome Adams said on Fox News Sunday. “There’ll be a lot of death,” Donald Trump added Saturday.

In Europe, nearly 3,000 people died Saturday as the disease continued to burn through Italy, France and Spain. In the less developed countries of Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, where large portions of the population live in extreme poverty, the death toll will certainly be in the hundreds of thousands.

The United States has emerged as the global center of the pandemic. The total number of deaths is approaching 10,000, with 1,331 deaths on Saturday alone. However, this number, according to an article posted Sunday in the *New York Times*, undercounts the actual number of victims.

“In many rural areas,” the *Times* reports, “coroners say they don’t have the tests they need to detect the disease. Doctors now believe that some deaths in February and early March, before the coronavirus reached epidemic levels in the United States, were likely misidentified as influenza or only described as pneumonia.”

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci, for his part, made clear that it would be a “false statement” to say the United States has COVID-19 “under control.”

This, to put it bluntly, is an understatement. The lack of even an accurate account of the number of dead is just one more grotesque example of a spectacle of disorganization and chaos almost defying description.

The United States still does not have a policy of testing and isolating all suspected cases, as recommended by the World Health Organization. Over 90 percent of cities throughout the country are missing the most basic supplies, including face masks for first responders and medical personnel. Ninety-two percent do not have enough test kits, and 85 percent do not have enough ventilators.

Meanwhile state and local governments continue to warn that they face an imminent shortage of ventilators. Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards has said his state is expected to exhaust its supply of ventilators by Monday, while Mayor Bill De Blasio warned that New York City is slated to run out of the lifesaving devices by Tuesday or Wednesday.

The government’s combination of incompetence and

indifference is personified by Trump himself, who, in his daily rambling press conferences, can hardly bring himself to express sympathy for the victims of the pandemic.

To the extent that there is any element of the catastrophe that really agitates Trump, it is the impact of the pandemic on the corporate bottom line. Fauci has said that the spread of Covid-19 can be significantly slowed, if not entirely stopped, by shutting down all nonessential businesses and maintaining a nationwide social quarantine that must likely last for several months.

But Trump himself, while occasionally paying lip service to the warnings of Fauci and the scientific community, declares repeatedly and with far greater conviction, as he did at his Saturday press conference, that Americans “have to get back to work.”

“Think of it,” he said. “We’re paying people not to go to work. How about that? How does that play?”

It would be a mistake to see Trump’s indifference toward human life as merely the manifestation of his sociopathic personality. However crudely, Trump is expressing a position that has widespread support within the ruling elite.

Under the slogan, “The cure should not be worse than the disease,” the capitalist media began arguing that the economic damage caused by the shutdown of businesses and factories would, in the long run, prove more harmful to society than the deaths that would result from a rapid return to work, even if the pandemic was not under control.

With consummate cynicism, the media presents itself as the champion of working people and the poor. For example, the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, which has never complained when corporations slashed jobs and cut wages to boost corporate profits, now professes, in an editorial statement published Friday, to worry about the shutdown’s “psychological toll on Americans who can least afford it.”

Viewing the pre-pandemic economy through rose-tinted glasses, the *Journal* asserts, “The tragedy [of the shutdown] is all the worse because the main victims are the low-skilled and blue-collar workers who had been gaining the most in the last couple of years.”

Gaining the most! Compared to whom? Perhaps the CEOs and other corporate executives whose average annual salaries, not to mention bonuses and earnings from investments, are several hundred times greater than the average worker.

And for all its concern about the burdens caused by a prolonged shutdown of unsafe workplaces, the *Wall Street Journal*—which

happens to be owned by the multibillionaire reactionary Rupert Murdoch—does not identify the section of the population that is likely to suffer the highest mortality rates from a premature return to work.

Stripped of all deliberate obfuscation, the demand to “balance” saving lives against the “economy” means nothing more nor less than sacrificing human lives for the profit interests of the capitalists.

From the standpoint of the ruling class, the process of class exploitation through production must continue. And those who die can be replaced. The single overriding concern is the growth and expansion of stock market values for the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

In another article published Friday, *Politico* declared, “Yes, We Need to Measure Lives Against Money.”

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the same argument is being made.

In Britain, the *Economist* argues, “Covid-19 presents stark choices between life, death and the economy.” The weekly writes, “It sounds hard-hearted but a dollar figure on life, or at least some way of thinking systematically, is precisely what leaders will need if they are to see their way through the harrowing months to come. As in that hospital ward, trade-offs are unavoidable.”

The *Economist* continues: “When one child is stuck down a well the desire to help without limits will prevail—and so it should. But in a war or a pandemic leaders cannot escape the fact that every course of action will impose vast social and economic costs. To be responsible, you have to stack each against the others.”

And what does the “stacking” consist of? In column A there is a global tally, country by country, of the numbers of people who are likely to die if there is a speedy return to work while the pandemic rages. In column B, there is another tally, bank by bank and corporation by corporation, of the billions in profits that will be forfeited.

The choice, according to the *Economist*, is clear. The consequences of a prolonged regime of factory shutdowns and social distancing are, from a sober-minded business point of view, too terrible to contemplate: “Markets would tumble and investments be delayed. The capacity of the economy would wither as innovation stalled and skills decayed. *Eventually, even if many people are dying, the cost of distancing could outweigh the benefits.*” [Emphasis added]

The stone-hard heart of the nineteenth century capitalist economist and hater of mankind, Thomas Malthus, still beats in the breast of the British ruling class.

Der Spiegel, writing on behalf of the German ruling class that gave the world Adolf Hitler, declares that it is “dangerous idea” to believe that the country “can ride out a multi-month lockdown without suffering any grave consequences.” Initially “it was right to follow the advice of virologists and to shut the country down in order to stem the uncontrolled spread of the virus. ... But in the coming weeks and months, we will have to continually reassess. At that point, serious decisions will have to be made about what risks we are willing to take in order to get the economy back on track.”

The “risk” that capitalist governments are preparing to take is

with the lives of the working class.

The demand for a return to work on the part of substantial sections of the political establishment has emerged as a clear line of social division between the working class and the financial oligarchy.

The calculations made by the ruling class and its apologists assume that all social and economic decisions must be based on the needs and interests of the capitalist profit system. Any policy or action that undermines that system or threatens the wealth of the ruling class is illegitimate.

But the working class, as an objectively progressive and revolutionary social force, has a completely different set of priorities and interests that are fundamentally incompatible with those of the capitalists.

Last month, the major Detroit automakers were forced to close down production amid a growing wave of walkouts by workers. Employees at Amazon, Instacart, and Whole Foods went on strike last week to demand safe working conditions and the closure of nonessential production. And nurses and other healthcare workers staged protests to demand the vital safety equipment they have been denied.

There can only be one priority in this pandemic: the saving of lives. All nonessential production must be shut down until adequate testing and contact tracing protocols are in place and the disease can be contained. All essential workers, including those in medicine, transportation, and food service, must be provided full protective equipment and guaranteed safe working conditions.

Yes, the issue of economic hardship is an important one, which must be addressed. As long as the pandemic makes it impossible for workers to safely return to their jobs, they must be fully compensated. The economic resources must come from the cancellation of the multitrillion-dollar bailout of the corporations and the reallocation of the funds to support the working population.

The fight for these demands must be developed into a broader struggle to end private capitalist control of economic life, transform the large corporations and banks into public utilities democratically controlled by the working class, and thereby establish a socialist economy that is based not on the procurement of private profit, but on the advancement of the interests of humanity on a global scale.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last week, “the alternatives present themselves as the capitalist profit system and death, or socialism and life.”

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