

Saving Wall Street, not lives

US pandemic cover-up responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands

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On Wednesday, researchers from Columbia University released a study showing that the massive US death toll, now approaching 100,000, is a direct consequence of decisions made by the Trump administration.

The study, posted on medRxiv.org, found that if the United States had begun social distancing and other control measures just two weeks earlier, it would have saved the lives of 54,000 people. The implementation of such measures one week earlier would have saved 36,000 lives.

These figures quantify the consequences of the Trump administration's efforts in January and February to minimize the threat posed by the pandemic. Despite clear evidence and warnings by scientists, Trump and his cabinet members systematically downplayed the significance of the disease. As late as February 28, Trump was still claiming that the coronavirus "is going to disappear" like "a miracle." Trump condemned those saying that COVID-19 was rapidly spreading throughout the country, declaring, "This is their new hoax."

But within the government, leading scientists had been ringing the alarm for nearly two months in a futile attempt to make the White House take the most basic measures to prepare for a major pandemic. "Public health officials were fully aware of the emerging threat of COVID-19 by early January 2020," wrote Rick Bright, the former director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, in a whistleblower complaint.

In a subsequent interview, Bright added "I knew that all of the signs for a pandemic were present. A novel virus, causing significant mortality, and spreading. All the signs were there. It was just a matter of time before that virus left China."

Bright's statements tear apart the administration's claims that "no one could have predicted" the pandemic, and that to the extent the response was delayed in the United States, it was because China lied about the spread of the disease.

Rather, the Trump administration, Bright said, was "intent on downplaying this catastrophic threat."

The deliberate efforts by the federal government to muzzle scientists and downplay the disease, combined with massive delays in the roll-out of testing, led states to begin restrictions far too late.

New York State implemented its stay-at-home order on March 22, more than two months after community transmission began in the United States in mid-January. Lockdowns in most US cities came three and a half months after Chinese researchers discovered the virus, prompting fears of a global pandemic.

While the Trump administration and the media blame China for delaying the release of information, it now emerges that as many as 50,000 deaths were caused by the White House's decision to postpone as long as possible the ordering of a lockdown.

Chinese scientists announced a cluster of unexplained illnesses on December 31, and the announcement was widely reported in the United States, including by Reuters, the Associated Press and the *New York Times*.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, on the basis of only publicly available data, was able to warn on January 24 that "evidence has emerged that person-to-person infection is occurring." Four days later, the WSWS wrote, "The outbreak has exposed the enormous vulnerability of contemporary society to new strains of infectious disease, dangers for which no capitalist government has adequately prepared."

But for months, US officials did nothing to prepare for the coming pandemic. It was not until nearly eight weeks after the first public statements by Chinese health officials that any systematic testing for COVID-19 began in the US.

Even as Trump did nothing to prepare for the spread of COVID-19, he imposed a travel ban on China against the advice of the World Health Organization and his own scientific advisors. Within the federal government, Bright and other scientists within the administration were desperately warning that a travel ban would not prevent the disease from entering the United States.

Why, despite the warnings of scientists within his administration, did Trump implement a purely cosmetic measure, whose aim would be to construct the narrative that COVID-19 would be kept out of the country?

Driving the White House's response to the pandemic from the beginning was not the threat of COVID-19 to human lives, but its impact on the stock market. The White House was well

aware that the pandemic would have a devastating impact. But it would come under conditions where Wall Street was already under tremendous strain. The markets had been artificially inflated through years of ultra-low interest rates and “quantitative easing,” which had fueled a massive rise in indebtedness that was undermining corporate profitability and threatening a collapse of the already wildly inflated stock market.

Trump and his advisers knew that the impact of the pandemic would trigger a market selloff, which could only be contained and reversed through the infusion of trillions of dollars in cash from the Federal Reserve and Treasury. In order to gain time, the White House suppressed information and misled the public while this bailout could be prepared.

An article by Edward Luce in the *Financial Times* last week provided a window into this process. “Nothing could be allowed to frighten the Dow Jones,” the *Times* wrote, explaining the thinking of the Trump administration. “Any signal that the US was bracing for a pandemic—including taking actual steps to prepare for it—was discouraged.”

The *Financial Times* quoted one person close to the White House as saying, “Jared [Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law] had been arguing that testing too many people, or ordering too many ventilators, would spook the markets and so we just shouldn’t do it.”

Amid the public silence, there was furious activity in the background as lawmakers were preparing what would be the largest government bailout of major corporations in history. The Trump administration was playing for time, keeping the public in the dark while a complex program for bailing out Wall Street could be put into motion.

This time was used to write what would become an 800-page bill known as the CARES Act, which created the framework for a multitrillion-dollar bailout of the financial system by the Federal Reserve and the funneling of hundreds of billions of dollars into major corporations from the Treasury.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell introduced the bill on March 25. Within two days, the CARES Act passed the Senate with a unanimous vote and the House with a voice vote. It was signed into law the same day. In other words, the largest redistribution of public funds in human history took just 48 hours.

An article in *Foreign Affairs* notes that this bailout would “blur the lines, never clear to begin with, between the public and private sectors and transfer a large portion of the global economy onto government balance sheets. This level of spending has no precedent in history—not even close. Not in war. Not in peacetime. Not ever.”

As soon as this bailout was secured, the media immediately changed its tone. It turned from focusing on images of mass death and overcrowded hospitals to “hopeful signs” and “silver linings” in order to declare that the pandemic was all but over and that workers should get back on the job.

Even as 1,500 Americans continue to die every day from COVID-19, all 50 states have reopened businesses, sending workers back to work in unsafe conditions and setting the stage for a massive resurgence of the disease.

The same total disregard for human life that prompted the White House to downplay the pandemic and hamper the federal response is at work in the back-to-work campaign.

Amid warnings by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield that the United States faces a major resurgence of COVID-19, Trump declared yesterday, “Whether it’s an ember or a flame... we’re not closing our country.”

In other words, no matter how high the death toll climbs, the needs of society will not be allowed to interfere with the profit-making of Wall Street. The priority of the government will continue to be the interests of financial oligarchy, not saving lives.

This is why the fight against the pandemic must be waged not only on the medical front, but on the political front as well. The struggle against COVID-19 is inseparable from the broadest possible fight against the criminal policies of the Trump administration and its supine enablers in the Democratic Party.

As the Socialist Equality party wrote in its recent statement, “Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives,” workers must:

Form rank-and-file safety committees in every factory, office and workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, should formulate, implement, and oversee measures that are necessary to safeguard the health and lives of workers, their families and the broader community.

There can be no “business as usual!” The pandemic exposes the urgent necessity for a complete restructuring of the processes of production, distribution and economic activity in general. The lives of working people and their families must not be sacrificed in the interests of corporate profits and the private wealth of billionaire oligarchs.

We urge all those who agree with these demands to draw the necessary political conclusions and take up the fight for socialism.

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To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>