

Trump on coronavirus pandemic: “Virtually nobody” affected

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The United States has now surpassed the horrific milestone of 200,000 official deaths from the coronavirus, more than the total number of Americans who were killed in World War I, Korea and Vietnam combined. The actual toll, measured by “excess deaths” over the average in previous years, has surpassed a quarter of a million. Worldwide, the number killed, based on reported figures, will surpass one million before the end of the month.

In the face of this horrifying toll on human life, US President Donald Trump declared on Monday that the virus affects “virtually nobody.” At a campaign rally in Toledo, Ohio he stated,

It [the coronavirus] affects elderly people, elderly people with heart problems and other problems. If they have other problems. That’s what it really affects. That’s it. ... Below the age of 18, like, nobody. They have a strong immune system, who knows? You look. ... Take your hat off to the young, because they have a hell of an immune system. But it affects virtually nobody. It's an amazing thing.

Trump concluded his statement with the demand that schools be reopened, “Open your schools. Everybody, open your schools.”

As a factual matter, Trump’s claim that the pandemic only effects “elderly people” is blatantly false. As he himself acknowledged in March, in one of the recordings released by Bob Woodward earlier this month, “Now it’s turning out it’s not just old people” affected by the virus. Twenty percent of those who have been killed in the US, or more than 40,000 people, were under the age of 65.

The longterm impact and adverse health consequences for those who contract the virus and live remain unknown. Moreover, with the death toll expected to rise as high as 400,000 by the end of the year, the pandemic

will affect “virtually everyone,” in the form of the death or serious illness of a family member, friend, teacher or coworkers.

Even for Trump, from whom one expects almost anything, there is something chilling in the indifference with which he speaks about the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. However, to view this in individual terms, an expression of the particular sociopathic personality of the present occupant of the White House, would miss the essential significance. Trump is speaking not just for himself but for a class.

The willingness to accept mass casualties, particularly among the elderly, has an underlying socio-economic foundation. In his evocative *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx, writing at the very dawn of industrial capitalism, explained that the attitude of the capitalist to the life of the worker was entirely conditioned by his or her ability to produce profit, that is, to work.

As soon as he is out of this process of labor and surplus value production, Marx wrote, the worker,

Has no work, hence no wages, and since he has no existence as a human being but only as a worker, he can go and bury himself, starve to death, etc.” In relation to capitalist economy, “the worker’s needs are but the one need—to maintain him whilst he is working and insofar as may be necessary to prevent the race of laborers from [dying] out. (From “Antithesis of Capital and Labor: Landed Property and Capital”)

This theoretical insight acquires, more than 175 years later, an astonishing reality. The worker who is no longer able to work is, from the standpoint of the ruling class, less than useless. Not only is he or she not producing

profit, the resources that are devoted to health care for the elderly are a drain on what could otherwise be spent propping up the markets or financing the war machine.

These considerations have animated the response of the ruling class to the pandemic. The implications of the attitude toward the massive loss of life are chilling. It was, after all, the Nazis who initiated the practice of medical euthanasia, justified with the concept of “life unworthy of life” (*lebensunwertes Leben*)—that is, segments of the population who had no right to live and whose killing was a positive good.

To be blunt, from the standpoint of the ruling class the disproportionate impact of the virus on the elderly and infirm has always been seen as a benefit. Before the pandemic emerged, countless reports from ruling class thinktanks noted the growing costs of health care due to rising life expectancies and the fact that workers are living years and often decades after they retire. They warned about the impact on government finances and military spending.

Governments throughout the world have displayed a criminal level of indifference toward the fate of the elderly from the coronavirus. Last month, the *New York Times* published an exposé of the response of Belgium, which has one of the highest per capita death rates for any country, finding that hospitals actually turned away the elderly, even though hospitals never filled to capacity. Nearly 6,000 nursing home residents have died in the country.

In Sweden, which pioneered the strategy of “herd immunity,” supposedly to focus on protecting the elderly, the victims have nevertheless been concentrated in nursing homes, particularly in Stockholm. The country’s minister of health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, was forced to concede by the end of April, “We failed to protect our elderly. That’s really serious and a failure for society as a whole.”

In the UK, where cases are expected to rise to 50,000 per day as a product of the “herd immunity” policies implemented by the Johnson government, the Queen’s Nursing Institute documented the horrific toll on nursing homes in the months of April and May. A report in the *Independent* in August noted that nursing homes “were put under ‘constant’ pressure to accept patients with coronavirus while being regularly refused treatment from hospitals and [general practitioners] for residents who became ill at the height of the Covid crisis.”

In the United States, moreover, while Trump is spearheading the murderous policy of “herd immunity,” it

has the support of the entire political establishment, from the Democrats and the *New York Times* (whose columnist Thomas Friedman introduced the phrase, “The cure can’t be worse than the disease”), to *Jacobin* magazine, affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, which aligned itself with Trump’s policy in an article published over the weekend.

The corollary to the policy of “herd immunity” is the imperative to “normalize death” on a massive scale. In March, the *World Socialist Web Site* defined the response of the ruling class to the pandemic as one of “malign neglect”—that is, the deliberate decision to minimize the government’s response to the virus in order to allow for its widespread transmission. Over the past six months, this policy has developed into something even more sinister, what might be termed “social euthanasia.”

The pandemic may be biological in origin, but the response by governments is driven by social interests and political imperatives. The initial downplaying of the danger, the utilization of the pandemic to organize a massive transfer of wealth to the rich, the drive to return workers to the factories, the reopening of schools and the whole policy of “herd immunity” all are the product not simply of Trump but of the capitalist system.

Workers are beginning to fight back. Rank-and-file safety committees of teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class are being formed in the United States and internationally. A mood of anger and rebellion has animated mass demonstrations against police violence. The broad mass of the population is moving to the left. What the ruling class is doing has not gone unnoticed.

It comes down to this: The working class is fighting for life, and the ruling class stands for death. To the ruling class policy of social euthanasia, the working class must and will respond with socialist revolution.

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