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Trump defunds the World Health Organization: A “crime against humanity”

On Tuesday, President Donald Trump announced that the United States would suspend funding to the World Health Organization, the most important global institution in the fight against COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

Trump’s action is a transparent effort to deflect attention from his own administration’s failures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic by blaming external enemies: China and the United Nations’ health care arm. The pandemic has now infected more than two million people and claimed more than 134,000 lives worldwide, including 644,000 cases and more than 28,500 deaths in the US alone.

While Trump’s decision is based on crude and backward political calculations, it will have a real and devastating impact. As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads throughout the world, Trump’s decision to defund the WHO will mean the deaths of countless people in developing countries whose health care systems are supported by the WHO’s equipment, personnel and expertise.



President Donald Trump speaks about the coronavirus in the Rose Garden of the White House, Wednesday, April 15, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

“President Trump's decision to defund WHO is simply this—a crime against humanity,” said Richard Horton, the editor-in-chief of the *Lancet* medical journal. “Every scientist, every health worker, every citizen must resist and rebel against this appalling betrayal of global solidarity.”

The majority of the WHO's resources go to Africa and the Middle East. These areas have so far suffered 910 and 6,815 deaths from COVID-19, respectively, numbers that are accelerating.

These are also some of the most vulnerable regions of the world, which have been impoverished and exploited by the imperialist powers for over a century. Countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Palestine and Yemen have had their hospitals and medical infrastructure bombed into oblivion over the past 30 years by the US and its allies. There have been repeated warnings that even small increases in the infection rate will overwhelm their largely nonexistent health care systems and cause a rapid surge in cases and deaths.

The World Health Organization is not just their front line against the coronavirus, but also against pathogens largely absent in the United States and Western Europe, including “polio, measles, malaria, Ebola, HIV, tuberculosis... and many other diseases and conditions,” as WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted in his press conference yesterday. The organization has provided millions of vaccines to fight these epidemics for decades, programs that now face a collapse of funding.

The WHO has sharply criticized the policies of Western governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and has called for urgent measures to contain it. On March 11, Dr. Tedros warned of “alarming levels of inaction” on the part of governments in responding to COVID-19.

Responding to the stated policy of the British government, and the unstated policy of other Western governments, to allow the virus to infect substantial parts of the population to generate “herd immunity,” Dr. Tedros warned of a “moral decay.”

“Not taking the deaths of elderly and senior citizens as a serious issue is one of the moral decays. Any individual, whatever their age, any human being, matters,” he said.

Trump's strategy in response to the pandemic, in contrast, has largely been one of denial. Despite warnings from China in January, or the more urgent declarations on February 24

from the WHO's mission to China, that infected countries needed to "prioritize active, exhaustive case finding and immediate testing and isolation, painstaking contact tracing and rigorous quarantine of close contacts," the administration did not implement mass testing until mid-March. By that time, the virus had been spreading essentially unchecked for two months.

As a result, the United States has seven times as many cases as China and nearly nine times as many deaths. Trump again claimed yesterday, "It is clear that our aggressive strategy is working," making no mention of the record number of deaths, 2,407 and 2,482, on Tuesday and Wednesday, respectively.

In place of any serious measures to contain the disease, Trump has tried to paint the virus as a foreign invader, repeatedly calling the novel coronavirus the "Chinese Virus" or the "foreign virus," and defended a White House official who referred to the outbreak as the "Kung flu."

In announcing the funding cuts, Trump claimed that "the WHO failed to adequately obtain, vet and share information in a timely and transparent fashion." He added, "WHO's reliance on China's disclosures likely caused a twenty-fold increase in cases worldwide" and that "so much death has been caused by their mistakes."

Any review of initial news reports of the outbreak—before they began to be colored by anti-Chinese propaganda—exposes these claims as lies.

On January 6, the Chinese government alerted the WHO and the rest of the world about a new pneumonia-like illness. By January 11, the WHO had published warnings about dealing with a new type of respiratory infection, and the genetic sequence was shared by China the day after. During this time, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention raised its alert level in case the infection was detected elsewhere.

The WHO rapidly sent an international team to China, including American delegates, all of whom made clear that there were no restrictions placed upon their movements.

Even as Trump is withholding half a billion dollars to fight against the most dangerous pandemic in a century, he has already handed over at least \$5 trillion in bailouts to Wall Street and major corporations, with promises of more to come. Included in this is a tax break that will provide the millionaires in the US with \$73.8 billion, more than 100 times what WHO has asked for to fight the coronavirus.

The WHO's constitution, referenced Wednesday by Dr. Tedros, states that "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being, without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."

These are high ideals, which embody the principles of science, rationality and solidarity that have been espoused by doctors, epidemiologists and scientists all over the world in their struggle against COVID-19. But working people must be clear that there can be no appeal for these ideals to the ruling class and its various representatives, including Trump and his counterparts in Britain, France, Germany and the rest.

The only social force that can defend these principles is the working class. In the fight to save lives—massively expanding testing, increasing medical care, raising the production of personal protective equipment—workers must realize that any solution to the pandemic requires a level of planning and global cooperation of which capitalism is simply incapable. Lessons must be drawn, above all that the battle against the pandemic is inseparably bound up with the struggle for socialism.

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