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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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01.01.2021

Vaccine distribution fiasco continues in the United States

The first three weeks of coronavirus vaccination in the US have proven to be a debacle. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), less than one-fifth of the 11.4 million vaccine doses distributed have been administered.

At the current rate of about one million doses administered per week, it will take another 329 weeks, or more than six years, to administer the vaccine to everyone in the country. In addition, since the vaccines currently approved for use require two doses to be most effective, the time to properly vaccinate everyone in the country may be closer to double the above estimate.



A Health Department worker fills a syringe with Moderna COVID-19 vaccine before administering it to emergency medical workers and healthcare personnel. (AP Photo/Matt Slocum)

President-elect Biden claims that he will distribute 100 million vaccinations during his first 100 days in office, 14 times the current rate. However, little has been forthcoming from his transition team on exactly how this will be accomplished.

The slow rollout has been proceeding during the worst month of the pandemic to date. The US recorded more than six million cases of COVID-19 in December alone, along with more than 70,000 deaths. While dips in reporting caused by the holiday season are showing a decrease in the daily case and death rates, these are expected to spike back up after the new

year, as reports from December are filed and an expected new wave of infections occurs as a result of travel during the last week of 2020.

In total, the US has now suffered more than 20,000,000 cases of COVID-19, and will have a death toll of more than 350,000 by the end of the month. Worldwide, there are more than 83 million confirmed cases and at least 1.8 million reported deaths.

An independent report from Bloomberg tells a similar catastrophic story about the state of vaccine distribution in the United States. According to the news outlet, nearly 20 million first doses of the vaccine have been allotted to states, but only 2.3 million have been administered, about 11.5 percent.

President Donald Trump has seen fit to blame the states for the ongoing chaos. He tweeted on December 30, “The Federal Government has distributed the vaccines to the states. Now it is up to the states to administer. Get moving!”

Trump, of course, made no mention of the fact that the states have no resources with which to swiftly distribute and administer the vaccines, something of which the US government was warned months ago. The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and the Association of Immunization Managers wrote to Congress in October that \$8.4 billion in emergency funds were needed to ensure a successful vaccination campaign against the coronavirus. Measures needed include more workers in health departments to administer the vaccines, more infrastructure to provide shots, and upgrades to the communications infrastructure to report and track vaccinations.

During that same period, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar claimed, “We project having enough for every American who wants a vaccine by March to April 2021.” The Trump administration also asserted that it would have 100 million doses of the vaccine by the end of 2020. A month later, in November, this number was more than halved to 40 million.

The October letter was a follow-up to a similar letter in the summer, when the Phase II trials indicated that various vaccines were likely to be successful. Nothing was done by the Trump administration or pushed for by the Democrats in Congress to prepare for the current situation.

At best, 20 million doses of the vaccine have been distributed to states. Now, state and local health officials are being asked to give vaccines on top of the other public health measures—including testing and contact tracing—they are being asked to carry out with little or no national coordination or support.

In Florida, for example, the Lee County Department of Health told residents that anyone older than 65 or any frontline health care worker could come to one of seven “first come, first serve” vaccine sites. Each site only had 300 vaccines to administer, causing wait times up of to nine hours. In Palm Beach, the county has set up a hotline to make appointments by phone, but the system has been regularly crashing from the overwhelming number of calls. The scenes are reminiscent of attempts by workers to get unemployment benefits in March and April.

A retired Pittsburgh nurse, commenting on the state of vaccine distribution, said: “There is no plan. It’s a total clusterfuck. I’ve asked my colleagues who are still working whether or not anything is being implemented to get a smooth vaccine distribution, and the answer is nothing.” She added, “One thing I do know is that the rich are going to get it first, before the rest of us.”

There are already numerous reports of those with concierge medical service offering to pay or “donate” tens of thousands of dollars to their clinics in order to get the vaccine as soon as possible. Services for the rich, such as Sollis Health in the Hamptons, were among the first to buy up the specialized refrigerators needed to store the Pfizer vaccine, which must be kept at -94 degrees Fahrenheit to remain effective. This has made it increasingly difficult for

hospitals and government services where workers are more likely to get their doses to procure the necessary equipment to receive the vaccines in the first place.

The problems facing the US vaccination program highlight the importance of maintaining other public health measures, including testing, contact tracing and isolation. A vaccine is another tool to end a pandemic, not a solution by itself. If vaccinations do end up taking months or years, they will be essentially worthless for preventing further death.

Such a state of affairs argues for a national lockdown and closure of non-essential workplaces, with full compensation to workers and small businesses, in order to stop the spread of the pandemic. It is the height of cruelty to have an effective vaccine against the coronavirus while forcing people to expose themselves and possibly die before they can get the cure.

The class divide and chaotic nature of vaccination in the US are being mirrored around the world. Even before the vaccines were approved for distribution, the United States and other major capitalist powers had already reserved 51 percent of the existing and planned doses. This has caused vicious competition between countries to get even a nominal amount of the vaccine for their respective health care workforces.

Such unequal distribution of the vaccine will also provide further opportunities for the pandemic to spread. As World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted in his New Year press release, “to protect the world, we must ensure that all people at risk everywhere—not just in countries who can afford vaccines—are immunized.”

“To do this,” he continued, WHO “needs just over 4 billion US dollars urgently to buy vaccines for low- and lower-middle-income countries.” This is a tiny fraction of the money spent on various bailouts and stimulus packages for Wall Street, and about 0.5 percent of the most recent US military budget, approved by both Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

That such relatively small sums are not available for mass inoculation of the world against a deadly pandemic speaks to the true orientation of the American ruling elite and the need for the international working class to take matters into its own hands.