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A coronavirus pandemic reality check

Around the world, from North America to Asia, governments are abandoning all measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, reopening schools, workplaces and mass gatherings. To justify these measures, the media endlessly promotes the false claim that the coronavirus pandemic is effectively over.

The reality is quite the opposite. In the past seven days, there have been more than 620,000 new cases recorded in the US and at least 10,000 official deaths as a result of the pandemic. Worldwide, the number of new cases grew by more than 2.8 million and nearly 48,000 human beings were added to the tally of the dead. As it has been since it first emerged, the virus continues to be a mortal threat for every person on the planet.



A grave digger wearing a protective suit stands during a COVID-19 victim burial at a cemetery outside in Omsk, Russia, Thursday, Oct. 7, 2021 [Credit: AP Photo/Uncredited]

Such figures did not stop the *New York Times* from publishing an opinion piece on Thursday by Paul Krugman entitled, “What if Things Are About to Get Better?” According to Krugman, the ongoing colossal loss of life should merely be viewed as the end of “the summer of our discontent,” as worded by the *Times* columnist. That nearly 86,000 people died in the US between June 21 and September 22, including more than 160 children, is of no consequence.

Instead, Krugman argues that because of a relative drop in cases in the US and limited vaccine mandates by the federal government and various corporations, the population “can feel fairly safe going back to the office, going out to eat and—most important of all—sending their children to school.” Moreover, workers must overcome their “unwillingness” to “engage in risky activities” and simply accept reopenings and the tens of thousands the inevitable premature deaths they will cause.

The *Times* piece also ignores the inconvenient fact that there is still no vaccine for children under 12, meaning that tens of millions of infants and school children are still vulnerable to the pandemic. Data from the American Academy of Pediatrics shows that hundreds of thousands of children are infected each week, alongside rising hospitalizations. The vast majority of these infections are caused by what Krugman views as “most important,” children being back in schools.

There is also no consideration of the spread of the pandemic in other countries. Eastern Europe continues to be one of the hardest hit regions of the pandemic. Poland has suffered more than 11,000 new cases and 175 new deaths in the past week, both figures up 50 percent from the week before. Ukraine has had a similar spike, reporting more than 82,000 new cases and nearly 1,700 dead over the last seven days. In Romania, cases have jumped to 89,000 every seven days, a 28 percent increase, while deaths have climbed to 1,762 per week, a 49 percent increase.

Even in Germany, often hailed as a model for Europe’s pandemic response, both new cases and deaths have risen by about 25 percent during the last seven days compared to the preceding seven days. Official figures of cases and deaths over the past week climbed to 68,000 and 400, respectively.

One of the worst hit countries is Russia, where cases and deaths have spiked sharply in recent weeks. Daily new cases have been rising in the country since mid-September and are approaching the peak seen last December. As a result of this surge, there were a record 6,400 deaths reported in the country last week.

Other countries that have seen a rise in their case and death counts include Sudan and Somalia. In both African countries, which have suffered greatly over many years as a result of indirect or direct US military interventions, the number of new reported cases has more than tripled. Deaths over that same period more than doubled in Sudan and increased by more than a factor of five in Somalia.

Among the many consequences of the hundreds of thousands of new cases each day will be the emergence of new and more infectious variants of the coronavirus, including the possibility of one wholly resistant to the vaccine. Such a variant, even under Krugman's Panglossian prognosis that the pandemic is ending in the US, would inevitably restart the waves of infection and death workers are still living through.

America's financial oligarchy has blinded itself to these dangers, focusing instead on more completely reopening the economy. The latest stage of the reopenings in the US has been the resumption of in-person mass cultural events. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra, where musicians last year were forced to take a 20 percent pay cut after its performances were canceled, has again begun full-capacity in-person concerts. The Boston Symphony Orchestra similarly began to have in-person performances at the end of September.

This is an international phenomenon. The United Kingdom will on October 11 remove 47 countries from its "red" list of countries where travel is unsafe, including world pandemic hot spots India and Brazil. Bali (the resort island in Indonesia), India and Vietnam are all slated to loosen their own travel restrictions. Vietnam, which suffered the vast majority of its 800,000 coronavirus cases and 20,000 coronavirus deaths since July, is beginning domestic flights and is planning to fully reopen for the summer 2022 tourist season.

In Pakistan, all educational institutions are slated to reopen even though there are still more than 1,200 new cases and more than 30 new deaths each day.

The argument that it is the appropriate time to reopen because cases are falling is all the more homicidal and fallacious given that even as cases have dipped slightly in the US, the rate of infection is still higher than during every other part of the pandemic except the highs of last November, December and January. And there has been a systematic effort, beginning with then-President Donald Trump and continuing under Joe Biden, to cover up the actual number of cases, including by limiting testing, inadequate contact tracing and the outright falsification of data.

Workers should also remember that similar arguments that reduced case numbers mean that it is safe to reopen the economy have been used before. It was federal policy under the Trump administration, developed in the wake of the initial lockdowns in March 2020. The slight drop in cases in April, combined with claims that enough personal protective equipment and other critical devices such as ventilators had been stockpiled, was used in late April and May to reopen auto plants and other areas viewed as critical to the American economy.

The results were predictably disastrous. A second wave in the summer saw tens of thousands more deaths, followed by some limited lockdown measures. Those were lifted after it was proclaimed that the increase in testing and the development of therapeutics meant that it was safe to reopen. What followed was the most severe spike in cases and deaths seen in the US and worldwide to date.

Workers must fight to eradicate COVID-19. An initial expression of this perspective has been voiced by UK parent Lisa Diaz, who organized the first global school strike against unsafe reopenings during the pandemic on October 1 and has called for a second. “Given that our politicians are doing nothing to protect us, I propose another school strike,” she declared. “Let’s send a powerful message, a global message, that we will not let our children be collateral damage. They shouldn’t be sitting ducks.”

This initiative expresses broad sentiments in the working class, expressed in one form by the fact that Diaz’s latest call for action got more than 42,000 views in 24 hours. Millions are looking not merely to abate the worst of the pandemic, but for a scientifically grounded strategy to end almost two years of needless suffering and death.

The objective basis for such a strategy will be presented at the October 24 meeting “How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication,” organized by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Scientists and workers will present the state of the pandemic and explain the need to eradicate COVID-19 worldwide. All those looking for the way to save lives should share the event as broadly as possible and register today.

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