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The global pandemic and World War I: The ruling class decides for death

The *World Socialist Web Site* has frequently compared the global coronavirus pandemic to World War I.

The pandemic is, as the WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North wrote in May 2020, a “trigger event,” analogous to the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, which set off a chain of events that culminated in the outbreak of a global cataclysm. “The assassination accelerated the historical process,” North explained, “but it acted upon preexisting and highly inflammable socioeconomic and political conditions. The same can be said of the pandemic.”

“When World War I began,” a resolution adopted by the Socialist Equality Party in July 2020 explained, “it was assumed by all belligerents that it would be over relatively quickly. However, the conflict dragged on and on, year after year, because the capitalist ruling elites, who dictated government policy, considered the sacrifice of the lives of millions of workers an acceptable cost in achieving their geostrategic interests in the conflict.”

As the conclusion of the second year of the pandemic approaches and as mass death continues seemingly without end, the analogy to World War I is being tragically and brutally substantiated.



Medical workers dress the body of a COVID-19 victim in the morgue of a hospital in Kakhovka, Ukraine, on Friday, Oct. 29, 2021. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

Already, the death toll from the pandemic is comparable to the death toll from World War I. Estimates of the total deaths of military personnel during the four years of the war range from between 9 million and 11 million. Civilian deaths are estimated at between 6 and 13 million, bringing a total estimated death toll to between 15 and 24 million.

By comparison, the number of deaths caused by the COVID-19 pandemic now stands at close to 5.2 million worldwide, according to official figures. We know, however, that this figure far understates reality. The Institute for Health Metrics at the University of Washington estimates that the total number of deaths attributable to COVID-19 (“excess deaths”) is more than 12.1 million, and possibly as high as 17.5 million.

And the pandemic is only just coming to the start of its third year. The third year of World War I began in the summer of 1916. The first two years of the war had seen a series of horrific bloodbaths, including devastating offensives by German forces against Russia and the First Battle of the Marne, fought on the outskirts of Paris, with casualties of over half a million.

As the war entered its third year, however, the scale of death increased. On the Eastern Front, the Brusilov Offensive between June and September of 1916, involving the armies of Russia on the one side and Germany and Austro-Hungary on the other, claimed more than 2.3 million casualties. In the Battle of Somme—a British-French offensive against

Germany on the Western Front, waged for 140 days between July 1 and November 18, 1916—casualties are estimated at more than 1 million, including more than 310,000 dead.

The Battle of the Somme was initiated five months after the beginning of the Battle of Verdun, a German offensive against France launched in February of 1916 that concluded 302 days later. There were three-quarters of a million casualties in the bloody slaughter, including more than 300,000 dead. Historian Alistair Horne (in *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*) notes that “Verdun came to gain the unenviable reputation of being the battlefield with the highest density of dead per square yard that has probably ever been known.”

As the bodies piled up in their millions, human life seemed to count for nothing. In his December 1915 “Christmas Memorandum,” General Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, outlined the aim, enacted at Verdun, of “bleeding France to death.” Falkenhayn’s *Unternehmen Gericht* (Operation Judgement) put into practice the strategy of *materialschlacht*, or battle of attrition. Massive casualties were expected on both sides, but the battle was to be considered won if the casualties on the other side were greater.

The same indifference to human life was expressed on the side of the French ruling class. Horne recounts the instructions delivered by a French colonel—operating under the direction of the future leader of Vichy France, General Philippe Pétain—to battalions sent to be slaughtered by German artillery at Verdun: “You have a mission of sacrifice; here is a post of honour where they want to attack. Every day you will have casualties. ... On the day they want to, they will massacre you to the last man, and it is your duty to fall.”

The international working class confronts an analogous situation today. Over the past several months, there has been a murderous shift in ruling class policy. Governments throughout the world are abandoning any pretense of ending the pandemic. The signal was given by Biden in July, when he announced that the US was “declaring our independence from a deadly virus... We can live our lives, our kids can go back to school, our economy is roaring back.”

“Independence” from the virus has not meant that infections and deaths would decline but rather that no significant effort would be made to stop death on a mass scale. The same policy has been implemented in Europe, and enormous pressure has been brought to bear

on countries that had pursued an elimination strategy (including New Zealand and other countries in the Asia-Pacific) to reverse course. Lockdowns, contact tracing, testing and all other public health measures essential to controlling and eliminating the virus have been systematically abandoned.

The consequences were both predictable and catastrophic. The claim that the virus could be stopped through vaccination alone is exposed by the massive spike in new cases globally.

In Europe, 4,200 people are dying every day. On Tuesday, the World Health Organization released a statement warning that the situation is expected to get drastically worse. The WHO projects that the official death toll in the European region, including Russia, will reach 2.2 million by the spring—that is, the WHO anticipates another 700,000 deaths in Europe alone over the next four months.

Again: Between now and the spring, the WHO is anticipating that 700,000 people will die in Europe from COVID-19, an average of more than 5,000 every single day. The anticipated death toll in the next four months is approximately twice the death toll from the 10-month Battle of Verdun.

Neither Germany nor any of the governments of Europe will do anything to stop the deluge. “We have removed measures such as lockdowns, blanket school and business closures or curfews from the law,” proclaimed Free Democratic Party member Marco Buschmann, who will be justice minister under the new government headed by Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In the United States, more than 1,000 people are dying every day. New cases are at 90,000 and rising. In Michigan, now the center of the pandemic in the US, more than 17,000 new cases were reported during the past two days, along with 280 deaths. New cases in Michigan are now higher than at any point in the entire pandemic, with a large percentage consisting of “breakthrough” infections of those who have been vaccinated.

The official death toll from COVID-19 in the US, currently at nearly 800,000, will likely surpass 1 million by the spring of 2022. Total deaths in 2021 are already more than the number of dead in 2020, with more than one month left in the year.

Most alarmingly, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reported this week that child infections are again on the rise. There were 141,905 new pediatric COVID-19 cases for the week ending November 18, up from 122,000 the week prior. More than 150 children under the age of 18 are hospitalized every day, and the overall death toll among children has risen to 636.

Yet the political establishment and media have declared that nothing can or will be done. The homicidal, indeed criminal, outlook of the ruling class was articulated in an article published in *The Atlantic* yesterday by Juliette Kayyem, the former assistant secretary for the Department of Homeland Security under Obama and faculty chair of the Homeland Security program at Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

Under the headline, “The Pandemic is Ending With a Whimper,” Kayyem acknowledges that more than 1,000 Americans are dying every day but insists that it is time to declare the war over and move on.

Kayyem, with impeccable liberal credentials, states: “[E]ven though the threat still exists, the country needs to be nudged into the recovery phase—and only elected leaders can provide that nudge.” She adds that “the question of when a crisis is over isn’t an objective matter that Anthony Fauci or any other scientific expert can decide. What is an acceptable trade-off between preventing infections and promoting the resumption of pre-pandemic routines? Should employers and school districts base their policies on the expectations of the most risk-averse people or those who have a higher tolerance?”

“The choice now facing the US,” Kayyem concludes her article, “is whether to acknowledge the progress we’ve made—and the subjective, political, nonscientific nature of the value judgments that face us.”

What does this mean? It is, in fact, an “objective matter” that 1,000 people are dying every day in the United States. However, Kayyem is declaring that a decision that the “crisis is over” is not going to be decided by science and objective fact but on a purely political basis. But who is making these political decisions and in whose interests? If science and objective reality are not to be the determining factors, what is? The inevitable conclusion is that the decision must be made by the ruling class and its political institutions, on the basis of economic and geopolitical considerations.

One might ask Ms. Kayyem precisely how many deaths does she and others who have a “higher tolerance” consider to be “an acceptable trade-off”? 10,000? 100,000? 1 million? What is the final calculus of her “subjective, political, nonscientific ... value judgements”?

This is a monstrous policy, and those carrying it out and advocating for it are nothing less than politically criminal. How is driving students back to the classrooms and workers back to unsafe workplaces any different from sending soldiers out into an endless wave of artillery shells and machine gun fire? The outcome is the same.

The pandemic, as a “trigger event,” is accelerating the underlying processes and tendencies of the crisis of global capitalism. The elevation of fascistic movements is the most violent expression of the demand for the removal of all restrictions on the spread of the pandemic. As Kayyem’s article demonstrates, however, the basic agenda is supported by the entire ruling class.

As the second year of the pandemic comes to a conclusion, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties affiliated with the International Committee of the Fourth International have initiated the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. The task of this Inquest will be to examine and refute all the lies promoted by governments and in the media over the past two years, indict and expose those who are responsible for a policy that has produced death on a massive scale, educate workers on what can and must be done to eliminate the virus, and raise the political and social consciousness of the working class.

A final comparison to World War I is perhaps the most important. The war was finally brought to an end through the intervention of the working class, culminating in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and a wave of revolutionary struggles throughout Europe. Similarly, a change in policy in response to the pandemic will not be realized outside of a massive social and political movement of the international working class to demand a strategy of global elimination.

The logic of class interests, expressed in the experience of the past two years, makes evident that such demands place the working class in a confrontation with the ruling elites and the entire capitalist system.

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