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CDC backs corporate demands to force the sick back to work

Monday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its guidelines for isolation and quarantine times, cutting the recommended isolation period for people infected with COVID-19 in half, from 10 days to 5 days. Those who are exposed to someone with the virus are encouraged to only quarantine for five days if “feasible,” or not at all if they have received a third “booster” shot.

The guidance means that five days after testing positive or having been exposed to someone who has tested positive, workers will be expected to return to work if they do not have symptoms. No reference is made on the need for workers to test negative for COVID-19 before reentering the workforce.

The guidance will only add force to demands by employers that ill workers get back on the job. On Monday, tens of thousands of people retweeted a Twitter post by an infected worker reporting that she was told to come to work by her employer, with hundreds of service, retail, transportation and health care workers, and even soldiers, commenting that they were told to do the same.



Dr. Anthony Fauci, White House Chief Medical Advisor and Director of the NIAID and Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House Campus, Monday, December 27, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Combined with a nationwide testing shortage, the CDC's new policies will only deepen the already massive surge of the pandemic fueled by the more transmissible and immune-evading Omicron variant. It has been known since the start of the pandemic that people infected with COVID-19 can transmit the virus even when they are not symptomatic.

Over the past two weeks, the seven-day average of daily new cases in the US has more than doubled, from 120,563 to 266,563, primarily due to Omicron. According to data compiled by newsnodes.com, the United States posted a shocking 472,000 COVID-19 cases on Monday.

The move was met with overwhelming condemnation by public health experts, and with ridicule by the public, as a capitulation to the demands of corporations that will lead to mass infections. Millions saw clearly that the CDC's change in policy was dictated by corporate interests and represents the latest abandonment of its responsibility to protect public health.

Data scientist Dr. Jorge Caballero wrote, "I've lost all respect for the CDC." Scientist Eric Topol tweeted a blank page to represent "data that supports" the CDC's position. Virologist Angela Rasmussen called the decision "reckless and, Frankly, stupid."

One of the most widely shared criticisms of the policy change was from cardiologist Dr. Haitham Ahmed, who wrote, “CDC shortened quarantine duration from 10 to 5 days. They felt this gets workers back faster & ‘minimizes disruptions.’ Except median viral shedding is >5 days and it’s the start of a surge. CDC is not the center for commerce & corporations. It’s the center for DISEASE CONTROL.”

There is no public health basis for the CDC’s new recommendations. Rather, they were clearly determined by the needs of the corporations, which face increasingly severe staffing shortages. In particular, the airline industry had lobbied the CDC throughout the past week to change its guidelines, as thousands of flights have been canceled due to mass infections among staff.

In addition to this blatant corporate lobbying of the top public health agency, an article in the *Washington Post* noted that the CDC “worried the sheer volume of infections could mean that tens of thousands of police, firefighters, grocery workers and other essential employees would be out of work.”

In other words, the priority of the CDC is clearly not to ensure the safety of these workers or stop the transmission of COVID-19 but rather to keep sick or exposed workers on the job in order to maintain the economy.

Echoing this rejection of any effort to stop the pandemic, on Tuesday New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, Governor Kathy Hochul and Mayor-elect Eric Adams announced at a joint press conference that one million students will be sent back to New York schools on January 3. When schools reopen, classrooms with COVID-19 outbreaks will no longer quarantine, with students only quarantining if they test positive.

Child hospitalizations for COVID-19 have surged five-fold in New York City in just three weeks, and the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in New York state has risen 12 percent in just one day. One in 50 people in Manhattan have been infected with COVID-19 in the past week.

Against the backdrop of this disaster, the Biden administration is sending a message that it is now abandoning the pretense that government policy is aimed at ending the

transmission of COVID-19. Combined with Biden's declaration that there is no "federal solution" to the pandemic, the US government is washing its hands of the pandemic.

A doctrine first elaborated in early 2020 of "herd immunity" and "living with" COVID-19 is being implemented in the demand by the Biden administration that the disease be allowed to become "endemic."

The entire political establishment, with the backing of the corporate media and official institutions like the CDC, treat COVID-19 as a simple fact of life, like the flu or the common cold. The claim is increasingly made that all those who do not work from home will at some point be infected with the virus. A corollary of this is that a vast number of people will die, and life expectancy will be significantly reduced.

The motto of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, "No more f***ing lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands," is being implemented in practice under the Biden administration.

There is a deepening effort to normalize mass infections, hospitalizations and deaths, while omitting or denying the possibility of eliminating the virus. The experience of China, which disproves this false narrative, is being universally vilified.

In opposition to China's policy of Zero COVID, which has saved millions of lives, the White House is embarking on a strategy of "Unlimited COVID," with no regard for the level of infections, deaths, and long-term debilitation that this homicidal policy produces.

The American ruling class is determined that it will not allow any effort to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to cut across corporate and financial interests. There is only one thing that matters: making sure that stock prices rise, no matter the cost in human lives.

In response to the CDC guidelines change, Wall Street immediately surged to a new record Monday and then another on Tuesday. As 470,000 people died in 2021, the Dow Jones Industrial Average surged by 6,000 points, closing up for the year by 20 percent, in the highest point increase in history.

In this speculative binge, there is an element that goes beyond indifference to mass death. There are those within the capitalist oligarchy who see the pandemic as a means of lowering expenditures on medical care for the elderly, who will continue to die in large numbers as COVID-19 is allowed to spread unchecked throughout the population.

The CDC's change in isolation and quarantine recommendation will exacerbate an already nightmarish situation, in which every workplace and school will become a hotbed for viral transmission at a level not yet seen throughout the pandemic.

Asked whether the CDC's guidance was "being driven solely by workers shortages and not in the interest of public health," Dr. Anthony Fauci replied that "On balance, if you look at the safety of the public and the need to have society not disrupted, this was a good choice."

Fauci's response demonstrates a complete betrayal of his responsibilities and that of the CDC, which are to the health of society, not the corporations. There can be no greater "disruption" to "society" than the death, maiming, and severe illness of its members.

By "society," the White House means the operation of capitalist profit-making, that is, the extraction of surplus value from the working class. The demand that public health be "balanced" against "economic" interests is nothing less than the demand that human lives be sacrificed for private profit.

The outrage on the part of principled scientists to the CDC's rigging of the rules is entirely correct. But the scientists alone cannot carry out a change in policy. Their demands must be grounded in a movement of the working class determined to resist mass infection, which is in their interests.

Resistance to the pandemic can only come through popular action. What is clearly necessary is the shutdown of all schools and nonessential production, with full social supports for all affected workers, combined with a massive expansion of testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, and other public health measures to stop the spread of the virus once and for all.

This strategy of eliminating COVID-19 has proven highly successful in China, where just two people have died of COVID-19 this year. If adopted globally, millions of lives could be saved and the pandemic brought to an end.

Scientists should continue to speak out against the Biden administration's refusal to address the pandemic and step up their efforts to educate the public on the science of elimination. Workers in every industry should defy the CDC's guidelines and those implemented at their workplaces, and build rank-and-file committees to take control of this dire situation and make safety decisions themselves.

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