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Capitalism's perpetual pandemic

On Friday, nearly one million more Americans tested positive for COVID-19, 2,000 lost their lives, and coronavirus hospitalizations reached their all-time high.

Across the US, emergency rooms are war zones. Doctors and nurses, working back-to-back shifts, are at the breaking point. They call families, one after another, telling them their loved ones have died. Hungry, dehydrated, sleep-deprived, they scramble to uphold their promise to “use my power to help the sick.”



Registered nurse Rachel Chamberlin, of Cornish, N.H., right, steps out of an isolation room where where Fred Rutherford recovers from COVID-19 at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, in Lebanon, N.H., Monday, Jan. 3, 2022 [Credit: AP Photo/Steven Senne]

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Amid this heroic effort to save lives, another effort is underway: an offensive in the media and political establishment to deny the severity of the pandemic, desensitize the population to mass death, claim that Omicron is “mild” and insist that nothing can be done to stop it.

New York Times columnist David Leonhardt wrote on January 5, under the headline “Omicron Is Milder,” that “Covid now appears to present less threat to most vaccinated elderly people than the annual flu does.” He added that “Covid increasingly resembles the kind of health risk that people accept every day.”

In the *Wall Street Journal*, financial executive Rob Arnott unironically mused in a column published on January 2, “Should I try to catch the Omicron variant of Covid to advance the cause of herd immunity?”

The Biden administration, meanwhile, has given up any pretense that it is seeking to stop the spread of the pandemic. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has instructed workers to return to their jobs just five days after testing positive, guaranteeing the continual infection of the population.

Many states have already ended the reporting of daily cases, and the CDC has been discussing measures to end daily case reporting altogether.

In an attempt to legitimize and give pseudo-scientific credibility to this policy, former Obama and Biden adviser Ezekiel Emanuel, together with other former Biden administration health advisers, including Michael Osterholm and Céline Gounder, called Thursday for COVID-19 to become the “new normal.”

Emanuel organized the production of three opinion articles published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA). The statements of these officials were hailed, with front page coverage in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and they led the COVID-19 segment on NBC Nightly News Thursday.

The lead essay, headlined “A National Strategy for the ‘New Normal’ of Life With COVID,”—written by Emanuel, Osterholm and Gounder—criticizes the Biden administration, not for allowing hundreds of thousands of Americans to die, but for claiming that the pandemic could be ended in the first place.

Even with vaccines and “immunity to SARS-CoV-2 from vaccination or prior infection,” the pandemic will never be brought under control, the statement argues.

The solution, as NBC put it in its interview with Emanuel, “means treating Covid like other respiratory viruses.” Emanuel told NBC, “We have to reorient our goal so we can get it to a manageable state and we can continue with our normal life while Covid is around, just like we do with flu.”

In other words, just as governments do not conduct contact tracing or isolation of those infected with influenza, so too COVID-19 should be allowed to freely spread throughout the population.

The article argues that the number of people who die from COVID-19 should no longer even be counted: “Policy makers should retire previous public health categorizations, including deaths from pneumonia and influenza or pneumonia, influenza, and COVID-19, and focus on a new category: the aggregate risk of all respiratory virus infections.”

Rather than take measures to end the pandemic, the US political establishment is promoting the equivalent of an accounting trick, aimed at burying and concealing deaths.

This “new normal” is premised on the rejection of the “Zero Covid” policy that has enabled China, a country of 1.4 billion people, to have just 5,000 COVID-19 deaths. If China had a death rate similar to the US, 3.4 million of the country’s people would be dead.

The authors of the JAMA article write, “The goal for the ‘new normal’ with COVID-19 does not include eradication or elimination, e.g., the ‘zero COVID’ strategy... Consequently, a ‘new normal with COVID’ in January 2022 is not living without COVID-19.”

While presented as a criticism of the Biden administration, the position articulated in the JAMA articles is in fact that of the US government. Biden is campaigning relentlessly for the reopening of schools to in-person learning. The class interests behind this policy are proclaimed ever more openly. New York Mayor Eric Adams declared last week, “It’s time to open up and feed our ecosystem, our financial ecosystem.”

The “new normal” of perpetual COVID-19 is, in practical terms, indistinguishable from the policy of “herd immunity” advocated by the Trump administration and expressed in the “Great Barrington Declaration.” The only difference is that the position of the former Biden administration officials dispenses with the myth that “herd immunity” would lead to the end of the pandemic.

All that is left is mass death in perpetuity, or, as UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson put it, “no more fucking lockdowns: let the bodies pile high.”

Left unstated is the reason *why* saving potentially millions of lives through an effort to eliminate COVID-19, as China has successfully done, is ruled out.

The central involvement of Emanuel, the Jack Kevorkian of public health policy, helps explain the underlying rationale.

Emanuel has long promoted the idea that the growth of life expectancy and the provision of health care to the elderly are imposing intolerable costs on society and extending the duration of life far beyond what should be allowed and tolerated. In an infamous 2014 piece in the *Atlantic*, entitled “Why I hope to die at 75,” Emanuel argued that “society... will be better off if nature takes its course swiftly and promptly.”

Emanuel has waged war on the sacred precepts of the medical profession: the Hippocratic oath, the pledge to “do no harm” and the belief in the fundamental duty to save lives and treat every human life as equally valuable. This oath, taken by every practitioner of medicine as a sworn duty, is an impediment to hospitals kicking the destitute ill and elderly to the curb. It must be done away with.

Condemning the “thoroughness” and “meticulousness” of the medical tradition, Emanuel identifies the problem of “overutilization” as being rooted in the Hippocratic oath, with its “admonition to ‘use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgment’ as an imperative to do everything for the patient regardless of cost.”

To those who argue that denying the elderly medical care “discriminates against older people,” and that “Age-based allocation is ageism,” Emanuel has a ready answer: “Unlike allocation by sex or race, allocation by age is not invidious discrimination.” This is because “everyone who is 65 years now was previously 25 years.”

If there is a stench of fascism around these statements, it is because the last society to declare war on the Hippocratic oath was Nazi Germany, where sections of the medical profession were integrated into the apparatus of state murder that killed tens of thousands of disabled people.

“How does the Hippocratic oath square with an oath to the Führer,” asks a doctor in the German television series *Charité at War*, depicting the corrupting influence of the Nazi eugenics program.

The open promotion of mass infection comes at the very point where there is growing resistance in the working class. Thousands of teachers, from Chicago to New York and San Francisco, are taking a stand to defend their lives and the lives of their students and the population as a whole.

For years, the most predatory sections of the capitalist class have worked to systematically reduce the life expectancy of American workers. The pandemic, which in 2020 alone reduced life expectancy by two years, has proven to be manna from heaven for the capitalist class. It has no intention of ending it. It will continue killing, predominantly those above the age of retirement, together with the chronically ill and the disabled.

COVID-19 threatens to kill millions more people throughout the world unless it is eliminated and eradicated. And as terrible as the immediate impact of Omicron is, the continued spread of the virus creates the conditions for new variants, potentially combining the transmissibility of Omicron with the lethality of Delta, that will have even more devastating consequences.

The example of China shows that COVID-19 can, and must, be eradicated! Through the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, coupled with a massive government program to roll out widespread testing, high-quality masks, quarantining, contact tracing and isolation, the pandemic could be brought to an end and life could get back to normal in a matter of months.

The fight against the pandemic emerges ever more openly as a class question—that is, a question of who controls society and how it is organized. The capitalist class has fought, is fighting and will continue to fight tooth and nail against a humane and rational response to

the pandemic. It is the task of the working class, organized behind a socialist program, to fight to end the pandemic.

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