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زبانهای اروپایی

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01.06.2022

Officials, media spread complacency as US enters third summer of COVID infections and death

Coronavirus infections, hospitalizations and deaths are rising fast in the United States, belying the official optimism and the complacent declarations that the pandemic is over. Case counts have more than quadrupled since the low point in mid-March, after the huge spike triggered by the Omicron variant in December and January.



The start of the the Indianapolis 500 auto race at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in Indianapolis, Sunday, May 29, 2022 [AP Photo/Michael Conroy]

The Memorial Day weekend (this year May 28-30) is the traditional start of summer festivals and other mass social activities. At this time last year, US coronavirus infection

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levels were only one-sixth those of today. And even with that much lower starting point, some 65,000 Americans died of COVID-19 during the summer of 2021.

This summer promises to be far worse, as the starting point is far higher, new variants are emerging, and virtually all efforts to limit the spread of the potentially deadly infection have been shut down.

Even the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one of the main promoters of public complacency, reports that 45 percent of the American population live in areas of medium to high levels of community spread. If the CDC had not changed its method of estimation earlier this year, that figure would be over 90 percent.

The *Washington Post*, in one of the few serious media treatments of the COVID danger this summer, wrote soberly: “Immunity built up as a result of the record winter outbreak appears to provide little protection against the latest variants, new research shows. And public health authorities are bracing for Memorial Day gatherings to fuel another bump in cases, potentially seeding a summer surge.”

The *Post* continued: “Even the vaccinated and boosted now grudgingly accept the virus as a formidable foe that’s here to stay as governments abandon measures to contain it.”

The prediction that the virus is “here to stay” is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is because “governments” abandoned “measures to contain it” that SARS-CoV-2 has been given the opportunity to spread, mutate, and infect hundreds of millions, and potentially billions, around the world.

Tragically, the prediction that “Memorial Day gatherings” would generate another rise in infections is already about to be realized. Mass gatherings are no longer described as “superspreader” events, but the change in language does not alter the reality.

The Indianapolis 500 car race was attended by more than 300,000 people on Saturday, more than double last year’s limited attendance. Similarly packed crowds, if slightly smaller, could be found at other sporting events—baseball games, the professional basketball and hockey playoffs—and at concerts, commencement ceremonies and dozens of other events.

Movie theaters did landslide business. The mindless celebration of imperialist militarism and special effects, “Top Gun 2: Maverick,” broke the box office opening-weekend record, with a four-day haul of \$156 million.

Air travel operated full blast throughout the holiday weekend, despite the cancellation of thousands of flights, partly on account of severe weather, but largely due to disruptions caused by pandemic illnesses among pilots, cabin crew, ground service workers and air traffic controllers. According to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), security officers screened a half million more passengers last Thursday than one year ago.

Most of the millions of passengers traveling every direction across the country sat in narrow seats in fully-loaded planes, for hours at a time, without wearing masks to provide even minimal protection for themselves and those who shared the cramped airplane cabins with them.

All this amounts to pouring gasoline on a raging fire, as the pandemic was already on an upward surge before the holiday weekend.

As recorded by the Worldometer site, the seven-day average of daily US case counts hit its low for the year, 28,042, on April 2. Since then, the seven-day average has surged more than 300 percent, with the one-day figure reaching 127,570 on May 19. Figures since then are incomplete, as a result of slowed data reporting during the week leading up to the three-day holiday.

The most recent rise is associated with the spread of new and more infectious and immune-evasive variants of SARS-CoV-2, including the BA.2 subvariant, which became dominant in March and had largely displaced Omicron BA.1 by early April. BA.2 is itself now being displaced by the subvariant designated BA.2.12.1, which accounted for an estimated 58 percent of all new infections in the week ending May 21.

Other new subvariants, BA.4 and BA.5, have also been detected, accounting for a growing but still small proportion of new infections, about 3 percent.

All these figures are huge undercounts, because of the systematic dismantling of case counting and tracking and the discontinuation of daily reporting from US state health authorities to the CDC.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), based at the University of Washington in Seattle, estimated earlier this month that only 13 percent of new COVID-19 cases were being reported to health authorities. This would mean that the actual number of new infections is above 700,000 a day, close to the all-time peak of 900,000 daily infections during the Omicron spike in January.

There are anecdotal local reports that provide a glimpse of what is coming.

Los Angeles County has already reported a daily COVID case count higher than the worst day of last summer, during the surge that accompanied the emergence of the Delta variant. On August 9, 2021, there were 4,248 new cases recorded in the county. On May 18, the county Public Health Department reported 4,384 new cases. Hospitalizations in the county, the most populous in the US, have doubled over the past two weeks, and the number of patients in ICUs is also rising.

Public health officials, however, have responded only by urging residents to wear masks in indoor public spaces, without suggesting a return to any form of mandate.

On a national scale, the daily number of COVID deaths has not yet passed the levels of a year ago, in large measure, presumably, because more of the population is vaccinated. By the end of May 2021, 53 percent of US residents had received at least one shot, and 46 percent were fully vaccinated. Today, those figures are 78 percent and 67 percent, respectively.

The vaccination rate has been virtually unchanged since the New Year, however, with children under five still having no access to vaccines, and a minority of adults either unable to be vaccinated for health reasons, unwilling, or without access. The effectiveness of the vaccines is waning and only 31 percent have received booster shots to strengthen their resistance to SARS-CoV-2.

The Biden administration has dropped any pretense that it has a policy to slow down, let alone halt, the pandemic. In his most recent comment on the subject, a single sentence in his commencement address Saturday at the University of Delaware, Biden treated the pandemic as history, saying, “A global pandemic ended a million lives in America alone—

a million—and upended, according to most studies, the lives of—personal lives of at least another 9 million children and family members, and many of your lives.”

Biden shouted the words “a million,” as though volume could disguise his indifference to the catastrophe which is ongoing. This indifference is not a personal trait, but expresses the class outlook of the American ruling elite which he serves.

Offices, factories and other workplaces must be kept open so that workers can remain on the job and produce profits for the capitalist owners. To enable their parents to work, children must be in school. Anything which obstructs the process of profit extraction must be done away with: lockdowns, a zero-COVID policy, any effort to save lives rather than increase corporate wealth.

A serious struggle against the pandemic requires an alternative class program, based on the international working class. The COVID-19 pandemic, as the WSWS has explained, is a trigger event, a turning point in history which has profoundly destabilized class relations and radicalized broad sections of workers and youth.

The most far-sighted scientists have made clear that from a scientific standpoint, the elimination of COVID-19 is now more feasible than ever before. But the capitalist class is opposed to and incapable of such an effort. Only through the building of an independent mass movement of the working class, armed with a scientific and political understanding of the pandemic, can further suffering and deaths be prevented.

World Socialist 31.05.2022