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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Evan Blake

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Dangerous new COVID-19 variants threaten massive fall-winter surge

One month into the fall season in the Northern Hemisphere, it is clear that the next global wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has begun.

Due to the dismantling of testing and data reporting throughout much of the world, official infection figures are now largely worthless. The most accurate estimate of the real number of daily COVID-19 infections from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) shows that 21 million people were infected globally on Wednesday, up 23 percent from the most recent trough of 17 million infections on September 27.

Amid this deepening crisis, the ruling elites throughout the world have discovered the perfect cure for the pandemic: Simply ignore it and cover it up. At most, the broadcast news has brief segments on the pandemic once per month, while the print media just echoes the lies of the capitalist politicians.

This propaganda has had a terrible impact on mass consciousness, and global society is wholly unprepared for the current surge. Having been told, in the words of US President Joe Biden, that “the pandemic is over,” many are failing to take even the most elementary precautions. As one observes the careless actions of the misled public, the image comes to mind of Pieter Bruegel’s famous painting “The Blind Leading the Blind.”

But the political leaders are not blind. With malice aforethought, they have ignored the repeated warnings of epidemiologists and prioritized the profit interests of the corporate-financial elite over life. From the beginning of the pandemic, far-right figures have sowed deep confusion within the population, while over the course of the past year ostensibly liberal governments throughout the world have embraced the homicidal “herd immunity”

strategy pioneered by the far right. The consequences of these policies are being realized as the world enters an even more dangerous situation.

The growing wave is unlike anything seen since the start of the pandemic and has many scientists deeply concerned. As a result of the unhindered spread of COVID-19 over the past year, the Omicron variant has spawned hundreds of subvariants with different mutation profiles, creating what experts have termed a “variant soup.”

The most worrying are a collection of highly-mutated “escape variants” that are more immune-evasive and infectious than all other Omicron subvariants. Particularly worrisome are BQ.1.1 and XBB, which are considered likely to become dominant throughout the world in the coming weeks. In Singapore, XBB became dominant two weeks ago and is fueling a massive surge of infections and reinfections.

Studies indicate that both of these subvariants and others will render ineffective the last remaining monoclonal antibody drugs Evusheld and Bebtelovimab, threatening tens of millions of immunocompromised people throughout the world with greater risk of severe disease and death.

One of the greatest concerns of experts is the mounting toll of Long COVID, a broad spectrum of prolonged symptoms that can affect nearly every organ in the body. A preprint study led by Dr. Ziyad Al-Aly of the Washington University School of Medicine found that compared to those with one COVID-19 infection, those with reinfection had double the risk of all-cause mortality, triple the risk of hospitalization, and nearly double the risk of at least one Long COVID symptom. The study notes, “The risks were evident in subgroups including those who were unvaccinated, had 1 shot, or 2 or more shots prior to the second infection.”

Significantly, the XBB variant has propelled reinfections in Singapore from only 5 percent in mid-August to 17.5 percent by October 14, an unprecedented increase that underscores the dangers of the new “escape variants.”

In an alarming press briefing Wednesday, World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 Technical Lead Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove stressed that the XBB subvariant “is showing significant immune-evasion.” She continued: “This is of concern for us, because we need to ensure that the vaccines that are in use worldwide remain effective at preventing severe disease and death. The more this virus circulates, the more opportunities it has to change.” She concluded, “We need to be able to track this virus. There are millions of cases being reported each week, but our surveillance has declined, testing has declined, sequencing has

declined, and that, in turn, has limited our ability as an organization, with our expert networks around the world, to assess these [subvariants].”

Dr. Kerkhove’s comments are a devastating indictment of the pandemic policies implemented throughout the world. Even if the current “variant soup” does not render existing vaccines unable to prevent severe disease and death, the constant spread of the virus provides it with billions of hosts in which it will continue to mutate and potentially evolve into a more lethal strain, while the WHO’s ability to monitor these mutations has been substantially degraded.

To say that American and world society are flying blind into a coming storm is a vast understatement. A more accurate description would be that the plane’s pilot has deliberately jettisoned the engine’s fuel, sabotaged the landing gear and told the air traffic controllers to go home.

Following the dictates of the Biden administration, on Thursday the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) switched from daily to weekly reporting of COVID-19 cases and deaths. On Friday, the agency quietly ended its limited program for distributing free masks. Last week, epidemiologist Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding revealed that the CDC has withheld data showing that the BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 subvariants are rapidly becoming dominant across the US and now account for a combined 11.4 percent of all variants. In New York, where these new subvariants have reached their highest proportions, COVID-19 hospitalizations surged by 9 percent in the past week alone.

The same processes are underway across Europe, where COVID-19 infections, reinfections, hospitalizations and deaths are steadily rising. In Germany, Oktoberfest and other large events encouraged by politicians are now fueling a second wave of BA.5 infections, which has pushed hospitals to the brink. Since Monday, there have been 680 deaths from COVID-19 across the country, over 60 percent higher than two weeks ago, and experts warn that the new variants will only compound an already dire situation. In France, where BQ.1 and BQ.1.1 now account for the majority of all infections, COVID-19 deaths are steadily rising.

The misinformed public is not to be blamed for the profound lack of scientific understanding. Misanthropy and debilitating pessimism will do nothing to effect a change in the pandemic. Rather, every effort must be made to counter the government’s propaganda and educate workers and youth on the science of the Zero-COVID elimination strategy, which remains viable and necessary today.

Almost exactly one year ago, on October 24, 2021, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) hosted a powerful webinar that brought together a panel of leading scientists who outlined a global elimination strategy to stop the pandemic. The horrific experience of the past year, which has seen an estimated 6.2 million excess deaths, imbues this event with even greater significance. This webinar comprehensively refuted the lie that nothing can be done to stop the pandemic and proved that millions of lives can still be saved.

In the past year, the recklessness of the pandemic policies has been extended to the arena of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which Biden himself acknowledged threatens to erupt into nuclear "Armageddon." Hospitals, schools and industries across the US and internationally are in a state of collapse after unending COVID-19 waves have caused massive staffing shortages. The coming winter will be catastrophic unless immediate action is taken by the working class.

Capitalism is an obsolete, anarchic social system that offers no future for humanity and must be replaced with a planned world socialist economy. The paramount task facing the international working class is to develop a mass global movement to stop the pandemic, end the war and rebuild society on socialist foundations.

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