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The “Wuhan lab” lie and the political witch hunt against science

Over the past week, the US media and the Biden administration have sought to legitimize the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 virus emerged from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China.



Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
[Credit: Sarah Silbiger/Pool via AP]

On May 23, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article by Michael R. Gordon claiming US “officials” said workers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick in November 2019. The story led virtually the entire US media to declare the conspiracy theory “credible.”

The corollary of the statement that the Wuhan lab conspiracy theory is “credible” is that all of the world’s leading experts in infectious diseases, who universally dismissed it after a rigorous investigation, were engaging in a massive cover-up.

Neither the *Journal* nor any of the other news outlets promoting its report disclosed the fact that Gordon was the author of the discredited 2002 *New York Times* story that falsely claimed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was seeking to buy “aluminum tubes” to build nuclear weapons.

Responding to the *Journal* report, the *Washington Post* declared the lab-leak theory “credible,” baldly asserting that “efforts to discover a natural source of the virus have failed.”

The Biden White House, meanwhile, has ordered US intelligence agencies to carry out an inquiry into the potentially man-made origins of COVID-19, while Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, speaking at the United Nations World Health Assembly, demanded a “transparent” investigation into the origins of the disease.

Along with the campaign by the Democratic Party, figures claiming association with left-wing politics, including journalist Glenn Greenwald and *Jacobin* contributor Branko Marcetic, have jumped in to legitimize the “Wuhan lab” theory.

With their coordinated campaign to promote the “Wuhan lab” lie, the establishment media and the Biden administration are bringing into the mainstream what would otherwise have remained in the smelly backrooms of fascist and far-right politics.

According to the proponents of the “Wuhan lab” conspiracy theory, the United States National Institutes of Health funded research by the Chinese military at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which then genetically engineered and released, whether accidentally or deliberately, COVID-19. “US paid Chinese People’s Liberation Army to engineer coronaviruses,” declared Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, in one of countless variants of this account.

The proponents of this conspiracy theory accuse National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci and leading disease experts—including Kristian G. Andersen, director of Infectious Disease Genomics at Scripps Research

Translational Institute, and Peter Daszak, president of the Ecohealth Alliance—of covering up the allegedly man-made origins of the disease, or having been directly involved in manufacturing it.

Far-right supporters of Trump are going on the offensive. “Told you,” tweeted the right-wing ideologue Rand Paul, with the hashtag #firefauci. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, a supporter of the fascistic QAnon movement, railed against Fauci on Twitter: “He needs to be FIRED!”

The legitimization of the far-right went so far as an official “correction” by the *Washington Post* of an article that it wrote in February 2020 on the promotion of the Wuhan lab narrative by the fascistic senator from Arkansas, Tom Cotton. The *Post*’s original headline read, “Cotton keeps repeating a coronavirus conspiracy theory that was already debunked.”

The *Post* editors “revised” the story this past week, posting a notice stating that the article had “inaccurately characterized” Cotton. “The term ‘debunked’ and *The Post*’s use of ‘conspiracy theory’ have been removed because, then as now, there was no determination about the origins of the virus.”

If the *Post* were being honest, it would state that the *Post* itself, along with the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, are now promoting the “conspiracy theory” that has, in fact, been debunked.

In stereotypical Orwellian fashion, the past must be rewritten to serve the interests of the present. In this case, the *Post* is in effect apologizing to and establishing an alliance with Cotton. The Arkansas senator infamously published in June of 2020 an op-ed in the *New York Times* calling for the Trump administration to invoke the Insurrection Act to deploy the military against protests over police violence.

In the thousands of articles written on the subject of the “Wuhan lab” theory, there has not been a shred of direct evidence indicating any connection between COVID-19 and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The most concrete “evidence” was provided by Gordon’s article in the *Journal* claiming that unnamed US officials said researchers at the institute were hospitalized in November.

However, according to the fact sheet issued by the State Department earlier this year, the alleged illnesses had “symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses.” Moreover, as Gordon’s article noted, “One person said that it [the evidence] was provided by an international partner and was potentially significant but still in need of further investigation and additional corroboration.”

In other words, the entire evidence for the “Wuhan lab” theory boils down to the assertion by a promoter of the Iraq war lies that some unnamed officials say some staff at the Wuhan Institute of Virology had symptoms “consistent with... common seasonal illnesses,” while other, also unnamed, officials question this claim.

The promotion of this unsubstantiated theory by the US media can be explained only on the basis of the socioeconomic interests driving it. As the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board wrote in its statement earlier this week, the campaign has two interrelated aims:

First, it aims to divert attention from the actions of the US and other governments in implementing policies that led to deaths on a massive scale. As the public begins to recover from the overwhelming shock of the pandemic, there will be demands for explanations for why so many people died, along with accountability for those responsible...

Second, the Wuhan lab lie seeks to drum up nationalist hatred to support the Biden administration’s central strategic aim: the preparation for economic and potentially military conflict with China.

While the scientists are the direct target, this campaign has as its aim the abandonment of all scientifically grounded measures necessary to contain the pandemic. The leading advocates of the conspiracy theory support the program of “herd immunity”—that is, allowing the pandemic to spread unrestricted.

As COVID-19 continues to spread rapidly throughout the world, new variants are emerging. Africa is facing a 20 percent surge in COVID-19 cases over the past week, with eight countries showing an increase of more than 30 percent. In the more vaccinated UK, the so-called “Delta variant” has become dominant, fueling an increase in cases.

With a looming global resurgence of the pandemic, the ruling classes will insist that no measures can be taken that save lives at the expense of profit. They will insist that blame for mass death, the equivalent of “war guilt,” is to be laid at the feet of China. The attack on science and scientists is aimed at silencing and intimidating all opposition to a policy that threatens countless lives.

But the ruling class’s inhuman and antiscientific policies confront growing resistance in a working class increasingly entering into struggle in defense its own social interests. It is this social force that provides the basis for the defense of science and for medically necessary measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. This is why the defense of science and the fight to stop the COVID-19 pandemic are inseparable from the building of a socialist movement in the working class.

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