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600,000 dead in the US from COVID-19: American capitalism “normalizes” mass death

On Thursday, the US National Cathedral rang its bell 600 times, once for every thousand people who have lost their lives to COVID-19 in the United States. But this little publicized event, which did not even make the evening news, was among the only public acknowledgements of the terrible milestone of 600,000 dead.



A procession of vehicles drive past photos of Detroit victims of COVID-19, Monday, Aug. 31, 2020 on Belle Isle in Detroit. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

On February 22, just one month after his inauguration, US President Joe Biden gave a speech in remembrance of the 500,000 people who had died from the pandemic at that point. “While we have been fighting this pandemic for so long,” Biden declared, “we have

to resist becoming numb to the sorrow. We have to resist viewing each life as a statistic or a blur on the news.”

One hundred thousand deaths later, this is exactly what has happened. Indeed, in the news these deaths do not even rise to the level of a “blur.” Most days, the evening news does not mention the number of people who died that day, much less remember individuals who have passed.

The decision of the media to “move on” from the pandemic was exemplified by the *New York Times*, which announced earlier this month that it was bringing to an end its “Those We’ve Lost” section. “[T]he need to chronicle the toll has grown less urgent as the numbers have declined in much of the world,” the *Times* wrote, “as vaccination rates have risen and as large numbers of people have returned to a more normal life.”

No one who watches the evening news would know that, in the past 30 days alone, 15,000 people have lost their lives from COVID-19 in the US—more than die of AIDS in an entire year. And when the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington estimated last month that the actual COVID-19 death toll was closer to 900,000, the media largely ignored the figure.

As for “much of the world,” contrary to the *Times*’ claims, the pandemic is raging without restraint. Even before we reach the halfway mark for the year, more people have died from the pandemic in 2021 (1,884,000) than in all of 2020 (1,880,000). India recorded this week 6,148 daily new deaths, its highest total ever, after one of its poorest states, Bihar, revised upward its death total to account for those who died at home or in private hospitals.

When the *Times* states that “large numbers of people have returned to normal life,” it is alluding to the fact that, across the entire political establishment and throughout the media, there is a deliberate effort to create a celebratory mood, effectively declaring the pandemic over even as hundreds of people die every day.

Or, as Biden put it in a speech earlier this month, “America is headed into the summer dramatically different from last year’s summer. A summer of freedom, a summer of joy, a summer of get-togethers and celebrations. An all-American summer that this country deserves.”

This campaign seeks to justify the abandonment of all serious measures to contain the pandemic, with the aim of ensuring the full reopening of schools and workplaces to continue generating profits for the financial oligarchy.

After the United States passed the milestone of 300,000 deaths, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted the efforts to “normalize” death on a massive scale. We wrote at the time:

The normalization of death arises from the decision, rooted in class interests, to treat “economic health” and “human life” as comparable phenomena, with the former prioritized over the latter. Once the legitimacy of the comparison and prioritization is accepted—as it is by the political establishment, the oligarchs and the media—mass death is viewed as unavoidable.

Since then, nearly all remaining measures to facilitate social distancing, or even the wearing of masks, have been dismantled. On May 13, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reversed its guidance on mask wearing, urging vaccinated people to stop wearing masks and socially distancing in crowded areas.

The abandonment of mask mandates was opposed by epidemiologists, who warned that the majority of people in the United States remain unvaccinated, while dangerous new variants of COVID-19 are surging around the world.

Throughout the world, the so-called Delta variant of COVID-19—the most transmissible so far—is surging. This variant is now causing 91 percent of cases in the UK, the Johnson government said Thursday. The number of daily new cases in the UK has doubled over the past two weeks, and the *Financial Times* warned that hospitalizations are growing “exponentially.”

The Delta variant is now also the fastest-growing variant in the US, which has approximately the same percentage of the total population vaccinated as in the UK (42 percent).

Epidemiologists warn that with the combination of declining vaccination rates, states particularly across the South with large unvaccinated populations and the abandonment of masking and social distancing, the United States could be facing a massive resurgence of COVID-19.

In the face of this looming disaster, states are abandoning efforts to even count the number of people who have become infected. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Wednesday: “A growing number of states are slowing the pace of their reports on key pandemic data, including cases, deaths and hospitalizations.” The *Journal* noted that “half of states are no longer providing daily reports. Some have gone from reporting data every day to five days a week. At least three states have lessened that frequency to three times a week, and Florida and Alabama this week shifted to a once-a-week schedule.”

Epidemiologists condemned the dismantling of mechanisms to even keep track of the disease. “The last thing we need in confronting the rise of the hyper-transmissible Delta variant is to not have a handle on the data,” wrote Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute. Topol warned, “As vaccinations have tailed off in the US, the number of new cases is no longer declining.”

Epidemiologists are also warning that the Delta variant targets young people even more aggressively than earlier variants, underlining the dangers posed by the drive to reopen schools.

But despite the danger, the Biden administration has only doubled down on its efforts to return to 100 percent in-person instruction in schools, driven by the demand of the ruling class for the continued availability of cheap labor by warehousing children in schools.

Workers must reject the ruling class’s campaign to abandon measures to contain the pandemic, the aim of which is the “normalization” of mass death to facilitate the enrichment of the financial oligarchy. As the United States is threatened with a new resurgence of the global pandemic, it is all the more urgent for workers to oppose the abandonment of social distancing and mask wearing and the ongoing dismantling of the health care infrastructure for tracking and isolating COVID-19 cases.

The effort to “normalize” mass death reflects the fundamental social dynamics of capitalism and the subordination of human life to the enrichment of the financial oligarchy. It is this social order that bears responsibility for the massive toll of the pandemic, which is in the final analysis the grisly expression of the incompatibility of the needs of society with capitalism. **World Socialist 11.06.2021**