

The destruction of public health and the growing threat of an H5N1 bird flu pandemic

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“I am anti-alarmist, but I would say that I have never been more worried in my career than I am about H5N1. Even when COVID-19 had started to spread extensively outside China in 2019, I was not as worried as I am now about H5N1.”—Dr. Matthew Miller, viral immunologist and director of the Michael G. DeGroot Institute for Infectious Disease Research at McMaster University

Throughout the world, in numerous interviews and articles written in reputable journals, scientists and experts are sounding alarm bells about the growing danger that the highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1 bird flu) could spill over into the human population and potentially become the next pandemic. Should this transpire, the resulting public health disaster would dwarf that of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed nearly 30 million people and debilitated hundreds of millions with Long COVID globally.

With a case fatality rate of above 50 percent among humans—roughly 50 times higher than that of COVID-19—it is not hyperbole to state that an H5N1 bird flu pandemic would be apocalyptic. Averting this is of the utmost urgency, and the demand for a global public health program against bird flu must be taken up immediately by the international working class.

H5N1 bird flu was initially discovered in farmed birds in southern China in 1996, with the first recorded case among humans detected the following year. Since then, the virus has been considered one of the most dangerous pathogens with pandemic potential due to its rapid rate of mutations and high lethality.

Since 2020, coinciding with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, H5N1 has quickly spread among dozens of species, including wild birds and poultry, cats, sea lions, polar bears, and, most recently, dairy cattle and house mice in the US, with hundreds of millions of animals estimated to have died or been culled globally.

The spread of the virus to dairy cattle is most concerning to scientists because of their close proximity to farmworkers and the greater inherent dangers of mammal-to-human transmission. So far, there have been three confirmed infections among US farmworkers, with the third raising alarm due to the appearance of respiratory symptoms.

Scientists have warned that the essential evolutionary

pathway for bird flu to develop into a global pandemic would be the capability of human-to-human airborne transmission, as was the case with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

In the worst-case scenario, the virus would develop this capacity, leading to a scene reminiscent of the initial spillover of SARS-CoV-2 at a wet market in Wuhan, China. With an average incubation period of 2-5 days (and up to 17 days), growing numbers of people would unknowingly spread the virus in their community, then globally via air travel, with chains of transmission extending through numerous countries simultaneously. Only this time the spillover is more likely to take place at a dairy farm in Michigan or Texas than at a wet market in Wuhan.

The deepening threat of a bird flu pandemic is now concentrated in the United States, where the response of the dairy industry, in collusion with the Biden administration and all responsible federal agencies, has been nothing short of criminal. Sitting on an epidemiological time bomb, they are proceeding with reckless disregard for the health and lives of the US and world population.

Over the past six months, H5N1 has spread rapidly among dairy cattle across the US and is now confirmed to be affecting 94 herds. The first case has been traced to December 2023, with the virus spreading undetected among cattle until late March. Ever since then, the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other federal agencies under the Biden administration have bent over backwards to accommodate the dairy industry and ensure its steady flow of profits at the expense of public health.

Far from drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, an attitude of indifference and cover-up now pervades in official circles. Aside from a single statement by White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre in early May, in which she repeatedly claimed “the risk is low,” the White House has said nothing about the growing dangers of bird flu. Reprising its role during the COVID-19 pandemic, the corporate media continuously refers to the “low risk” facing the population, when, in fact, the danger of a bird flu pandemic has never been higher.

Most significantly, the Biden administration has not imposed

any requirements on the dairy industry to allow the CDC and other agencies to systematically test, report or track infections among cattle and farmworkers.

To date, only 239 viral genomic samples have been publicly released by the USDA, despite numerous appeals by scientists for the agency to release data on every infection. The sequences that have been released are from early April at the latest, and therefore do not clarify the evolutionary path of the virus.

Repeating one of the greatest crimes of the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden administration and the CDC have conducted the bare minimum of testing, the cornerstone of any public health strategy to prevent pandemics. Only 45 dairy farmworkers or others in contact with infected cattle have received an influenza test, meaning that a growing number of cases are likely going undetected as farmworkers are left defenseless and at the mercy of their corporate bosses.

In May, the CDC discouraged wastewater surveillance testing for H5N1 when this was offered by leading molecular virologist and wastewater tracker Dr. Marc Johnson.

The latest USDA epidemiologic brief revealed that 28 percent of all US farms transport their livestock using trucks shared with other farms that are not cleaned prior to use. Perhaps the most basic public health measure of cleaning such facilities was not enforced over the past three months, and there is no indication that the Biden administration intends to change this status quo.

Despite the existence of a bird flu vaccine that is being used on poultry in multiple countries and could be tested among US dairy cattle, this has not been imposed due to the profit imperatives of the dairy industry, as some countries bar imports of products from vaccinated animals.

Neither the Biden administration nor any of the agencies responsible have issued a ban on unpasteurized milk and other dairy products, despite the fact that consumers infected by these products would increase the likelihood of the virus developing the capacity for human-to-human transmission. They have also not mandated the use of ultra-pasteurization, despite a recent study finding that H5N1 can survive normal pasteurization.

Summing up this process, Dr. Rick Bright, an immunologist and COVID-19 whistleblower during the Trump administration, stated:

We're not stopping it. We're not doing anything to keep that infected milk and infectious milk on the farm. We're not testing these cows before they're put back onto the milking line or sent to slaughter... We're just sort of letting it go and spreading it in a very naive way.

Most recently, the USDA revealed that 66 house mice in New Mexico have tested positive for H5N1, which they claim were near a poultry farm but have not substantiated with genomic

data. This only raises the dangers of bird flu spreading among humans, as rodents are key vectors for disease, most notoriously rats during the Black Death, which killed off half the population of Europe in the 14th century.

The response of the American ruling class to the threat of another, even more dangerous pandemic amounts to a collective shrug. For these modern-day Malthusians, COVID was a godsend for culling the elderly and infirm, the "surplus population" whom they see as an unnecessary drain on their profits. The past four years have seen nothing but bumper profits for the financial elite, as they funneled trillions into their own coffers.

The whole experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demands urgent action by the international working class to stop the present and growing danger of a new pandemic. Immediate measures must be taken to actually address this unfolding public health crisis, both in the US and internationally. At a minimum, these include:

- Mass testing of all cattle and farmworkers in the US, combined with rigorous contact tracing and the safe isolation of all infected humans and animals
- Rank-and-file public health workers must be in control of the CDC, USDA and other federal agencies, to ensure full transparency of all data on H5N1
- For a vast expansion of public health funding and resources to contain the spread of H5N1 and other infectious diseases by socializing all aspects of health care.
- Workers' control over the dairy and meat industries to ensure that safety, not corporate profits, is the guiding principle in responding to threats to public health.

The fight for these demands can only be developed in opposition to the government, corporations and media, who are determined to prevent any disruption to the stock market and the flow of profits.

The anti-scientific response to the growing threat of a bird flu pandemic parallels the relentless attacks on scientists, including researchers centrally involved in the fields of pandemic preparedness and evolutionary biology such as Drs. Peter Daszak, Kristian Andersen and Peter Hotez. The scientific community and public health are being crippled at the most critical juncture, as climate change and other factors fuel the threat of future pandemics.

The collapse of public health and the normalization of mass death from infectious diseases make clear that capitalism has reached a dead-end. It must be replaced through the socialist reorganization of global society.



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