

Senate committee clears the way for Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and his planned assault on public health

Bill Shaw

5 February 2025

The Senate Finance Committee voted to recommend Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as the Trump administration's Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). The party-line committee vote of 14 to 13 sends his nomination on to a full Senate vote anticipated to take place in the coming week.

The clearance by the Committee all but guarantees Kennedy confirmation. The Committee chair, Republican Bill Cassidy from Louisiana, had been the lone member whose vote was uncertain. A physician who had led Hepatitis B vaccination campaigns, Cassidy voiced concern about Kennedy's notorious anti-vaccination charlatanry.

At the end of the hearing last week, despite not getting sufficient reassurances from Kennedy on vaccines, Cassidy left the door open, saying "You may be hearing from me over the weekend." Cassidy subsequently confirmed on the Senate floor following the vote that indeed he did have multiple conversations with Kennedy over the weekend.

Cassidy was tight lipped about which way he would vote until two minutes before the Committee vote was taken, when he posted on X:

I've had very intense conversations with Bobby and the White House over the weekend and even this morning. I want to thank VP JD specifically for his honest counsel. With the serious commitments I've received from the administration and the opportunity to make progress on the issues we agree on like healthy foods and a pro-American agenda, I will vote yes.

The full Senate is nearly certain to follow the committee on a partisan vote to confirm Kennedy. Once confirmed, Kennedy—the most visible, outspoken, and influential anti-vaccination, anti-science quack during the COVID-19

pandemic—will oversee the nation's public health agencies. The significance could not be clearer: under the Orwellian slogan "Make America Healthy Again," the ruling class intends to destroy the public's health. It is a massive attack on the working class and its hard-fought gains in life expectancy during the 20th century.

Kennedy's confirmation clears the way for five more reactionary, anti-science nominees to the core HHS agencies. They include Jay Bhattacharya for National Institutes of Health Director, Dave Weldon as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director, Marty Makary as Commissioner of Food and Drugs, Mehmet Oz as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Administrator and Janette Nesheiwat as Surgeon General.

Given the ease with which Kennedy, the most notorious anti-vaccine huckster in America, is assuming the top position in HHS, the Republican-led Senate will surely offer no obstacles to his subordinates.

The vote in favor of Kennedy comes as the COVID-19 pandemic is in its tenth wave, with half of states seeing high or very high levels of transmission. Influenza and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) are also at high levels, as is norovirus, a gastrointestinal bug. This "quad-demic," which began prior to Trump's inauguration, highlights the degree to which the Biden administration already began the process of taking a wrecking ball to the nation's public health infrastructure. Under Biden, there were roughly 1 million excess deaths attributable to the pandemic in the US.

The years-long bipartisan assault on public health has escalated into full-scale war under the second Trump administration, which has rapidly withdrawn from the World Health Organization (WHO) and imposed a sweeping order banning all communications to the public and social media postings by the HHS public health agencies. Over the past week, they have also forced these and other agencies to scrub over 8,000 web pages covering a wide swath of vital information, mostly pertaining to public health issues. The

communications ban, which was supposed to expire on February 1, was “indefinitely” extended over the weekend.

The impact is stark. Hospitals actively incorporate the latest CDC guidance, published on its website, into their protocols for providing patients the best care in accordance with the latest scientific evidence. Hospital staff are trained in these protocols also per CDC recommendations. Numerous datasets published by the CDC and frequently used by scientists were also taken offline.

These actions are wholly unprecedented, and yet they are only the beginning. The communications ban is merely a pause until Kennedy and his minions are in charge, after which we can expect a purge of scientists from these agencies. In 2023, while running his own presidential campaign before allying with Trump, Kennedy pledged to fire 600 workers at the NIH if elected, stating, “We’re going to give infectious disease a break for about eight years.”

These purges will also involve making conditions for the scientists as unbearable as possible, forcing them to resign their positions to maintain a semblance of integrity. Already, the Trump administration has ordered CDC scientists to halt submissions of manuscripts to journals as well as to pull back manuscripts currently under review. These orders were issued to purge publications of any material offensive to the fascist political interests of Trump and his political allies, including the world’s richest man Elon Musk.

For decades, the CDC was considered a “north star” by the world for how to prevent and control disease. Originally formed to eradicate malaria from the United States—a mission in which it was successful—it became a destination for the world’s public health practitioners and scientists to learn the state of the art. It took on new significance during the Korean War, when it formed its famed Epidemic Intelligence Service, largely to counter the perceived threat of biological warfare. The EIS is famed for playing a leading role in the successful campaign to eradicate smallpox from the globe decades later.

That the CDC and its sister agencies in HHS are now under a full-frontal attack by anti-science, anti-public health charlatans speaks volumes about the decline of American imperialism and the panic of the ruling class as it careens from crisis to crisis. The elevation of Kennedy inside the fascist Trump administration symbolizes this long-term decline and rightward lurch of American capitalism.

As noted by David North on the 60th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s assassination:

As for the deeper political significance of Kennedy’s assassination, the events of the past decade have further substantiated the ... appraisal of

the event as an initial manifestation of the breakdown, under the pressure of interacting domestic and international contradictions, of American democracy.

The Democratic party bears central responsibility for the rise of the far-right and the deepening war on public health. It was the Biden administration that drove the first nail into the coffin of public health, discarding the precautionary principle in favor of its “forever COVID” policy. It eliminated mask mandates, free vaccines and expanded Medicaid coverage, while pretending that an ongoing pandemic and the “mass disabling event” of Long COVID were nonexistent.

Not a single Democratic politician has called for mass organization and opposition to Trump’s assaults on public health, or to Kennedy or the other five nominees who are set to demolish the agencies they will oversee. Not one Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee during the hearing challenged Kennedy on his bald-faced lie that children “basically have a zero risk on COVID,” a lie he repeated twice during the hearing. According to official CDC data, over 1,700 children have died of COVID in the US alone, while the real figure is far higher.

Channeling opposition to Kennedy and the destruction of public health through the Democratic Party and its satellites such as the Democratic Socialists of America is a bankrupt policy doomed to failure. The Democrats are marching in lockstep with Republicans to roll back decades of life expectancy gains in the working class.

The fight for public health is instead inextricably linked to the fight of the working class against capitalism. Only a social system that prioritizes the health of society over private profits can restore science-based policies. Principled scientists and public health advocates must therefore turn to the working class as the only force capable of defending and advancing public health and science.



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