

Trump's assault on public health and the growing threat of an H5N1 bird flu pandemic

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Over the past week, a series of developments have reaffirmed the imminent danger of a highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1 “bird flu”) pandemic, for which American and world capitalism are wholly unprepared. Historically, bird flu has had a 50 percent fatality rate among humans. Were such a pathogenic variant to begin spreading through society, the crisis could quickly dwarf that of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has so far killed nearly 30 million people and debilitated over 400 million more with Long COVID.

The latest such development took place on Friday, when New York Governor Kathy Hochul ordered the temporary closure, cleaning, and disinfection of all live bird markets in New York City, as well as in Westchester, Suffolk and Nassau Counties. The order came after bird flu was detected in seven birds at markets in Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn during the past week.

This followed the Monday issuance of an advisory to all health institutions in the state by the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) and New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYCDOHMH) recommending “accelerated subtyping of Influenza A in hospitalized patients,” as part of a belated attempt to detect cases of bird flu. The advisory, issued over two weeks after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a nearly identical statement on January 16, suggests that any patient hospitalized and found to have influenza A should have the culture tested for bird flu within 24 hours of their positive test.

The US is presently mired in its worst flu season since 2009, with New York and 42 other states experiencing “High” or “Very High” levels of respiratory illnesses, including the flu, COVID-19, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). The CDC estimates that there have been at least 24 million illnesses from the flu alone, causing 310,000 hospitalizations and 13,000 deaths so far this season.

Over the past year, scientists have continuously warned of the dangers that patients co-infected with seasonal flu and bird flu could facilitate a reassortment of genes between the viruses, with bird flu evolving to become transmissible between humans. Given the minimal testing for bird flu to date, this could very well be taking place under the radar of public health authorities.

Another critical development came on Wednesday, when the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) released data indicating that the more dangerous D1.1 genotype of bird flu is now spreading among at least six dairy herds in Nevada. This is the same genotype which recently killed an elderly man in Louisiana and placed a teenager on life support in British Columbia.

Researchers studying the D1.1 strain are concerned with how quickly it is assuming dominance among cattle. They are still trying to determine its capabilities and to ascertain why it is spreading so fast and behaving aggressively. With hundreds of thousands of farm workers interacting with animals in the US poultry and dairy industry, the danger of spillover of this lethal strain could grow quickly in the weeks and months ahead.

Finally, on Thursday the CDC released a redacted version of its longstanding Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) which makes no mention of bird flu whatsoever and is only a third of the normal length. When the report was initially published online, it included data showing that bird flu can likely spread from cats to humans, and vice versa within households. But these data were quickly taken down and not included in the version of the report sent to news agencies.

For the first time in the agency's history, the release of the MMWR was delayed by over two weeks, due to a sweeping gag order imposed by the Trump administration to suppress virtually all public communications from numerous federal agencies. Prior to the issuance of the gag order, at least three reports on bird flu were slated for

publication in the MMWR, and their removal was not explained. This is redolent of Trump's heavy-handed censorship of the CDC in mid-2020, when he blocked the publication of multiple studies on COVID-19 in MMWR reports.

All of these ominous developments take place on the eve of the looming Senate confirmation of the quack anti-vaccine zealot Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., slated to become Trump's Health Secretary on Monday. The only Republican who was briefly undecided, Bill Cassidy, cast the decisive vote in Kennedy's favor on the Senate Finance Committee, making his confirmation in the full Senate all but guaranteed.

In the weeks ahead, the rest of Trump's gang of anti-science charlatans are on track to take the helm of the nation's public health agencies. These include the mass COVID infection advocate Jay Bhattacharya to head the National Institutes of Health (NIH), television huckster Dr. Mehmet Oz to head the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and anti-abortion fanatic Dave Weldon to head the CDC, to name only the most notorious of the bunch. Their stated aim is to cripple and destroy the agencies they are ostensibly tasked with leading.

Alongside the broader wrecking operation to smash all social services in the US, led by the fascist oligarch Elon Musk, the entire public health edifice is set to be dismantled.

On Friday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Trump administration is preparing an executive order to fire thousands of HHS, CDC, NIH, FDA (Food and Drug Administration) and CMS employees as soon as next week. In November 2023, Kennedy stated at an anti-vaccine conference that he plans to fire 600 NIH workers, adding, "We're going to give infectious disease a break for about eight years."

In addition, the first two weeks of the Trump administration have seen the ending of all relations with the World Health Organization (WHO), the defunding of USAID, the shuttering of thousands of public health web pages, and sweeping attacks on research and scientific inquiry.

The threat of myriad infectious diseases facing humanity could not be higher. Not only bird flu, but every virus and pathogen known to man is breathing a sigh of relief in the knowledge that its closest allies, Trump and Kennedy, will soon shepherd it into communities across the US and internationally.

The anti-public health measures of the Trump White

House are akin to shutting off all the water mains in a burning building, while giving a press conference saying that everything is fine.

In response to this existential crisis, the Democrats have not lifted a finger, making clear that nothing will be done by any section of the capitalist political establishment to protect the health of the population. The Democratic Party, through its total dismantling of all public health measures against COVID-19 under the Biden administration, set the ideological and material precedent for Trump and the Republicans to quickly overthrow what little remains of public health infrastructure.

The very fact that the US is the epicenter of the growing threat of bird flu is due to the criminal negligence of the Biden administration and state governments controlled by both capitalist parties, which over the past year placed profits over lives and willingly let H5N1 rip through hundreds of dairy cattle and poultry farms. In the process, 66 Americans were officially infected with bird flu, the second-highest annual figure for any country since the virus was first detected in 1997.

The fight for public health and the prevention of the next pandemic will only be taken forward by the working class, in unity with principled scientists. It is entirely possible to stop bird flu in its tracks, as well as to end the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, eliminate seasonal flu, and more, but only through the deployment of a socialist public health program.

The global renovation of indoor spaces, including retrofitting with high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters and the safe deployment of Far-UVC technology, would dramatically cut down transmission of all respiratory pathogens, while minimizing the risk of bird flu and other emerging infectious diseases. Combined with mass testing, contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected patients, and the use of high quality masks, the elimination of numerous pathogens would quickly be achieved.

The fight for this socialist public health strategy must become a critical component of the fight against fascism and the Trump administration's ruthless assault on the working class.



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