

SPECIAL REPORT

The Threat of a World Flu Epidemic

MARCH 12 (IPS) — An influenza pandemic of immense proportions, capable of killing millions worldwide, is now virtually inevitable by September unless the expansion of food production and global preventive measures embodied in the ICLC's International Development Bank proposal are implemented now. At this moment, each day of delay in implementing the IDB means the death of 50,000 to 70,000 human beings from epidemics, and starvation ... **a human life for each second of delay.**

Public health officials in the United States have themselves concluded that some sort of influenza pandemic is unavoidable by the fall of this year on the basis of their studies of the swine flu variety that killed a soldier at the U.S. Army base at Fort Dix, N.J. two weeks ago. These officials have confirmed that the new strain is so dissimilar to existing viruses that practically no one is immune or resistant to it. Although it has been determined that the Fort Dix strain is at least as contagious as most other flu varieties, it has not yet been confirmed if the new virus possesses the "killer" virulence of the 1918 strain which it closely resembles.

That strain caused a pandemic which left 20 million dead in 1918-19.

In November 1975, the Labor Committees warned that the failure to implement international moratoria and the IDB in the 90 days ending March 1 would lead rapidly toward an irreversible ecological collapse. The outbreak of the "swine flu," and the "Victoria flu" which is now sweeping the advanced sector killing thousands, is evidence enough that the drastic fall in the world's living standards has done catastrophic damage to the human race.

Debt Collection Equals Deaths

Wall Street's attempt to collect every penny of outstanding dollar denominated debt has already resulted in the continuous destruction of the capacity of the human race to resist the onslaught of infectious disease. Debt service has been looted from the account of variable capital — the absolutely necessary payments for wages, education, social services, hospital, etc. required to maintain and reproduce the productive working class. This looting can proceed for an extended period of time without producing an apparent change in society, i.e. things appear to be the same as they were. However for example, this primitive accumulation "creates" an enormous deficit of necessary payments to the account to variable capital. At a given point, this accumulated deficit begins to manifest itself in more apparent signs of social decay and in its latter stages in an increase in death rates. The rate of social disintegration tends to accelerate exponentially as the looting process proceeds. As the net deficit increases, each dollar looted from necessary variable capital expenses now has a more socially destructive effect than a dollar looted at some previous point in the process.

Understood within this overall context, the recent sharp rise in death rates from the Victoria flu pandemic in such areas as New York and Britain is a first approximation of the effects of accumulated deterioration of living standards, in the form of cuts in municipal services, nursing home care, decrease in the real value of social security payments, frozen wages, etc. In the past year, cuts in New York City's municipal services alone amounted to \$600 million, as a conservative estimate. Concurrently, as a result of this winter's Victoria flu, the City's overall death rate has increased by 20 percent, with most of the flu and flu related deaths among the elderly on social security, in nursing homes, or in chronic care hospitals.

When taken into consideration with other depression (budget cut) related debts, such increases in the death rate, provide the following approximation of the current state of social collapse: one life is now being lost for each \$15,000 in budget cuts. (Coincidentally this amount is roughly equivalent to the actual current dollar value of city services required to maintain an individual at the present level of labor productivity)

The momentary quality of such death-ratio expressions can not be overstressed. The death rate figures represent a quantitative momentary expression of the rate of collapse; it is the equivalent to examining the point on a curve that plots an exponentially increasing rate of acceleration. While it is obviously possible to project based on the previously mentioned kill ratio a death rate for 1976 — such a projection would not even be an accurate approximation. As that rate was being calculated the city and State, under directions of the banks, were already in the process of implementing further cutbacks, with more (numbering in the billions of dollars by their own estimates) on the way. These cuts will further accelerate the rate of increase in the death rate, for reasons previously stated, to holocaust proportions.

In addition, previous budget cuts and other means of debt collection looting have already destroyed the social infrastructure to such an extent that even if the debt service payments stopped immediately, it would still be impossible to restore the cuts in time to prevent a killing epidemic of flu next year. Each day of delay in declaring debt moratoria and restarting necessary production adds to the number who will die—again in an exponential process i.e., the cost of each day's delay in human lives increases exponentially, such that tomorrow's delay will murder more people than today's, and so on.

The Swine Flu Threat

The U.S. Labor Party has issued the following short term measures for the mass production of a "swine flu" vaccine to minimize the possible deadly effects of the new strain and to allow for IDB development measures to be implemented:

The U.S. Congress must immediately appropriate \$250 million toward U.S. vaccine production in the form of a

guaranteed purchase of any unused vaccine produced an a guarantee of free vaccine for the general population by the pharmaceutical companies.

An additional \$250 million to the UN's World Health Organization to support vaccine production in other areas of the world, particularly in Western Europe and the Socialist sector.

An epidemiologist from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Ga. who has been monitoring the new flu strain has confirmed that such an investment program is an immediate priority: "The data we have now strongly indicates that the swine flu will be next year's pandemic. Very likely, we won't get any more information on its virulence until it breaks out widely in September or October, and by then it will be too late to begin large-scale vaccine production." "That has begun now," he concluded, "and the pharmaceutical companies will only do it if they have government guarantees of purchase."

Since it was first discovered three weeks ago at Fort Dix Army Camp in N.J., evidence of the swine flu has now been found in over 250 men in the camp, with a 30 percent infectivity rate in the platoons of the four original cases, (one of whom died.) The strain is very likely the result of a recombination of flu viruses from human and swine varieties of the disease, and probably came from third world areas where humans and animals are forced to inhabit the same living space.

Epidemiologists investigating the Fort Dix outbreak insist that the disease must have originated outside Fort Dix, and was discovered there only because of US Army testing. According to a spokesman for Walter Reed Hospital, now investigating the current cases at Fort Dix, "There's no question that the new swine flu is transmissible from human to human. As for whether it exists outside of Fort Dix, you bet it does. By now it must be seeded to dozens of other bases, to say nothing of the population at large. The only reason it was picked up first by the military was because we test more frequently for it (than do civilian health services)."

A worried epidemiologist at the U.S. Public Health Service explained that sample testing of the population should be done to get an accurate reading of the present outbreak of flu, "but our federal funding is limited and shrinking, so all we can do is wait for samples to be sent to us from doctors. As you would expect from such a system, we end up with a spotty and inaccurate picture. It's the same with plague, encephalitis, and many other diseases."

Thus far, only several thousand samples from flu victims around the country have been tested, and except for several isolated cases, all outside of Fort Dix have been Victoria.

The Advisory Committee on Vaccinations for the U.S. Public Health Service met on March 10 to review the latest data gathered concerning the swine flu and to decide whether a recommendation on vaccine production for the next flu season is necessary. After hearing the evidence, the committee decided to adjourn without making a recommendation either way and to reconvene in several weeks, hopefully after "more conclusive data" are available. A leading spokesman for the Public Health Service confided after the meeting, however, that the general opinion of those involved in collecting and analysing the data is that the vaccine will

"most certainly be recommended. There's no way we can take a chance on this one. The evidence we have in no way eliminates the possibility that we are dealing with a 1918 type organism." Under such circumstances a two week delay on the grounds that no one will support an appropriation for vaccine until more evidence is found, is a suicidal posture!

In Jan. 1975, the Labor Committees predicted a probable flu pandemic for 1976 as the first stage of a holocaust. AS the working class population is increasingly starved and overworked — weakened by looting to pay Wall Street's dollar debt — resistance to all diseases drops drastically and the development of mutant strains of flu is ensured. The new viruses threatening millions are such mutants — due to Wall street's austerity policies.

The devastating effects of the current "Victoria flu" epidemic — far less fatal than the "swine" variety — confirm what damage Wall Street has been allowed to do to the human race. Deaths from "Victoria" have risen by nearly 70 per cent in the U.S. and Great Britain over the past week alone. In Britain 1300 died in the past seven days, and the overall death rate is 15 per cent above normal. Swedish hospitals are reported to be overwhelmed with patients, with many sleeping in hallways. Global death rates from the flu have not been reported, but may be reaching 10,000-20,000 a day, if global mortality even approaches that of Britain. In the U.S., more than 1200 have died and the disease is still on the increase throughout the Midwest.

The Previous Epidemic

A look at the 1918 catastrophe gives ample explanation for the epidemiologists' fears. In 1918, as now, the world was devastated by the consequences of a capitalist breakdown crisis. From the 1913 depression through the chaos and grinding austerity of World War One, living standards had plummeted. Food consumption had dropped to famine levels in Asia and most of Europe. The potato crop, blighted by an earlier disease wave, had failed, spreading hunger through Germany and Eastern Europe. Imperialist blockade was ravaging the infant Soviet Republic. Under such conditions the population's resistance to disease was demolished. A similar process, on an even greater scale, is already taking place today.

The 1918 swine flu most likely began in Asia, but like its 1976 coterpart was first discovered at a U.S. Army post. The flu started in March, then as now at the end of the usual flu season, and spread rapidly into Europe via U.S. troops, from there into Asia, and then back into the U.S. civilian population. By July-August 1918, it had recrossed the Atlantic, hitting the East Coast ports and spreading within weeks through the civilian populations as far as California and Alaska. By October, 1918, the entire US was engulfed in a major epidemic with soaring death rates. Emergency tent hospitals were set up: Libraries and other public areas were closed; even barber shops were shut. The Army Sanitation Corps issued a general advisory to the population that "the universal practice of hand shaking should be stopped immediately." All police in Seattle and several other cities were required to wear face masks.

These precautions were to no avail. The New York City death rate soared to 800 per day; in Pennsylvania, 1000 died per day. By December there were 20 million dead worldwide.

one half million in the US! In New York State alone, 20,000 perished.

Reason For Panic

There is ample reason for panic among epidemiologists. Such panic is manifesting itself in the denial of obvious realities. According to the head of the Center for Disease Control and Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Vaccinations, Dr. David Sencer, "The pharmaceutical industry would have no trouble making 200 million doses of swine flu vaccine before the season hits."

However, according to Dr. Maurice Hilleman, flu expert at Merck, Sharpe, and Dohme, a leading vaccine manufacturer, "There's no possible way we could make 200 million doses by flu season. So far, the virus doesn't grow well on chicken egg medium (the usual growing medium for flu viruses), and it might take months to get it to grow. Secondly, our total egg capacity for the entire industry is fairly fixed at a maximum of one half million eggs a day, and even if we get the virus to grow, we can't expect more than one or two doses per egg. Increasing the number of eggs requires large capital input, and that would take months." Flu experts at Park Davis and other pharmaceuticals confirmed Dr. Hilleman's statements.

An initial input of approximately \$20 million could eliminate certain critical bottlenecks, such as a shortage of

high speed continuous flow centrifuges. However, nothing short of an all-out crash program as outlined above could hope to put a real dent in the situation.

The experts at the pharmaceuticals also have significant "blind spots." An official at Merck, Sharpe, and Dohme said this week, "I'm not so sure we need a swine flu vaccine. After all, we have a good Victoria vaccine, and we know that Victoria can kill, so why not keep making it. When we get more data on the swine flu, then we can switch. Of course with a government guaranteed purchase we could go ahead and make both, with emphasis on the swine, but at this point it doesn't seem like it's necessary."

Of course, if they feel they can reap a profit, the pharmaceuticals will go along with a government mandate to produce vaccine. At this point they are not actively pushing for such mandate.

We repeat our warning of November: continued inaction on the continuing drops in production, consumption and services will increase the number of deaths and drastically decrease the world economy's ability to stop the holocaust process. Available estimates indicate that even with the immediate implementation of the IDB, existing disease momentum will result in the loss of at least 5 million people who could have been saved by earlier action. If the IDB is not functioning by early May of this year, an irreversible ecological holocaust is inevitable.