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**Capitalist competition**

As Covid-19 continues to spread across the globe, more than 200 vaccines are being developed worldwide against the virus. Twelve are in phase 3, where they are tested with humans, and six are already approved for early or limited use.

Millions of people are following the development of these vaccines with the hope they will put an end to the pandemic that has killed so many and halted everyone’s lives. Capitalist governments are desperate to develop a vaccine because the sooner a vaccine is ready, the sooner baseline exploitation under capitalism can return.

The ‘America First’ approach was and still is trying to guarantee priority access for the United States, while other nations bid against each other for the vaccine and the equipment necessary to store it, rather than developing a global solution through cooperation. This is not only about the lack of coordination, but also U.S. sanctions against countries such as Iran that continued just when they were hit hard by the pandemic. This shows us that saving lives is not the driver behind all these efforts.

Other nations rushed into this race. The Chinese pharmaceutical company CanSino Biologics has a vaccine candidate that is in phase 3, but already has limited use among the Chinese military and is in late-stage trials in Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Russia. The same is true of Sinovac Biotech’s vaccine, which is being used with high-risk workers in China and is undergoing phase 3 trials in Indonesia, Turkey, and Brazil, where they resumed after a controversial case. The state-owned Chinese company Sinopharm has been using two different inactivated virus vaccines on a limited basis in the United Arab Emirates, and is doing trials in other countries.

The Russian state-run Gamaleya Research Institute’s Sputnik V, which demonstrated 92 percent efficacy, is another vaccine already being used. The announcement came two days after the US pharmaceutical company Pfizer and German drugmaker BioNTech released their late phase 3 results showing 90 percent effectiveness, updated to 95 percent on November 18.

Most recently, the US pharmaceutical company Moderna showed preliminary data that its vaccine could be 94.5 percent effective. The company’s vaccine has a significant advantage over Pfizer’s, which requires storage at -70 degrees Celsius and hence has significant barriers to distribution. Moderna claims its vaccine can be stored at a more manageable -20 degrees Celsius and explained that once doses are defrosted they can last longer in a refrigerator than initially estimated: up to 30 days, which would facilitate distribution logistics. These two vaccines could be close to receiving emergency use authorization (EUA) from the Food and Drug Administration. Pfizer has already submitted its EUA application.

The vaccines mentioned so far are the ones that have reached later stages of development. Other big pharmaceutical companies in Phase 2 or Phase 3 are: Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca, Novavax, Canada’s Medicago, and India’s Bharat Biotech. AstraZeneca announced today that they are getting results around 90 percent effectiveness and said that their vaccine won’t need to be stored at subzero temperatures.

While individual companies across the world scramble to develop a vaccine, one would think these companies and governments would be able to come together to stem the spread of a virus that threatens us all. Instead, what we see is all of these social efforts, investments, and experiments done in an uncoordinated and uncollaborative manner. For these large companies, what matters first and foremost is the value of their shares. So it is important for them to show that they are “first” with a vaccine – even before having robust results. The premature release of “positive” data also means many governments will run to buy a vaccine without guarantees of its safety or efficacy.

The race among private pharmaceutical corporations for larger portions of the market also furthers the well-founded distrust among the general public and healthcare workers of vaccines that are being rushed because of competition. Healthcare workers are considered high risk and will be among the first to receive the novel vaccines under emergency approvals, but many doctors and nurses want more data before being exposed. The capitalists are reluctant to go into new lockdowns and even less likely to provide safety measures that will reduce the number of cases. Rather than forego profits, they prefer to expose hundreds of millions to vaccines that haven’t been fully tested.

This race is not only about corporate profits but also the geopolitical benefits that come with being the first country to create a vaccine. It is no surprise that the same countries that dominate the world geopolitically – the United States, Germany, Russia, the U.K., and China – are the main countries in the current vaccine race. In these countries, as in most others, scientific research receives state funding, but the resulting profits end up in private hands. For example, the Bayh-Dole Act allows U.S. universities to sell patents on discoveries funded by tax dollars.

A closer look at the United States reveals the vast amount of resources governments are putting into this vaccine race. Operation Warp Speed (OWS), a Trump administration initiative, already reached an agreement with Moderna, and on August 11, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) “announced up to $1.5 billion in funds to support the large-scale manufacturing and delivery of Moderna’s investigational vaccine candidate” in exchange for 100 million doses. That came on top of earlier support to the tune of $483 million and $472 million.

Excerpted: ‘Capitalist Competition Is Sabotaging the Race for a Vaccine’

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