

This Was Fairly Trivial: A CEO's Assassination and its Aftermath

By Lee Cicuta

Brian Thompson, CEO of health insurance giant UnitedHealthcare, was fired upon by a masked assailant around 6:46 a.m. on December 4, 2024 outside the New York Hilton Midtown Hotel where the company was set to hold an investor meeting. The shooter stepped up behind Thompson with a handgun fitted with a silencer and fired three bullets at the CEO at close range. There was at least one bystander, but the assassin fled rather than approach them. On the bullet casings left behind from the shots read the handwritten words: Delay, Deny, Depose. Three shots, three words, and an expired CEO was sufficient for the act's worldwide audience to receive it as a call to revolutionary action against the corporate profiteers of ableism, medical neglect, and mass death.

Delay, Deny, Defend: The Profit of Medical Neglect

Little sympathy has been found among the general public for a multi-millionaire who lead the most profitable company of a despised industry. Thompson was named CEO of UnitedHealthcare — the insurance arm of UnitedHealth Group — in April of 2021. UnitedHealth Group Incorporated sits at 8th place in the Fortune 500, and is the 9th most profitable corporation worldwide. UnitedHealthcare has [the largest market share](#) of health insurance policies, extracts a higher premium from patients than any other insurer within the United States, and also denies claims more than any other insurance company according to available data: a staggering [one-third](#) of the claims they receive.

Only a year previous to the assassination, November 14th of 2023, a class action lawsuit was brought against UnitedHealthcare for denying coverage to elderly patients by [deploying an AI model called nH Predict](#) they claim has a 90% error rate. The algorithm allegedly takes data on post-acute patients and [produces estimates](#) on their medical needs, length of stay, and discharge date. UnitedHealthcare claims that the AI is not used to make final decisions on claims, but the [Stat investigation](#) referenced in the lawsuit found that UnitedHealthcare employees were being pressured to keep post-acute care stays within 1% of the minimum determined by the AI or risk disciplinary action, regardless of whether the patients technically qualified for more care. One internal training document obtained by Stat discussed how managers were taught to respond to pushbacks on denials: “If a nursing home balked at discharging a patient with a feeding tube, case managers should point out that the tube needed to provide ‘26 percent of daily calorie requirements’ to be considered as a skilled service under Medicare coverage rules.” On May 20, 2024, UnitedHealthcare filed a [motion](#) asking that the class action lawsuit be dismissed because “plaintiffs have failed to exhaust the exclusive administrative appeal process set by the Medicare Act for challenging coverage determinations.” The class action lawsuit was initiated by family members on the behalf of the patients because at the time of the lawsuit both patients were already deceased.

UHC is the largest health insurance company but it is certainly not the only one engaging in such practices to deny patient care in service of profit. In October of 2024, less than two months before the assassination, the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations [released a report](#) that outlines the use of AI by the U.S.'s three top Medicare Advantage insurers — UnitedHealthcare, CVS (which owns Aetna), and Humana — to bulk-reject post-acute care claims. A [ProPublica investigation](#) in March of 2023 found that Cigna is using an AI algorithm called PXDX that allows its doctors to instantly reject claims as “medically unnecessary” without ever opening a patient’s file. “We literally click and submit,” one former Cigna doctor said. “It takes all of 10 seconds to do 50 at a time.” Cigna’s review system was designed by Dr. Alan Muney, a former pediatrician and current Chief Medical Officer of SelectQuote Inc., who has been helping insurance companies extract as much value as possible from their business for decades. Muney told ProPublica that he was hired by Cigna because he had designed a similar system for denying claims for UnitedHealthcare when he was the Chief Medical Officer there from 1998–2007. Former Cigna executive Ron Howrigan (now CEO of Fulcrum Strategies) said of the practice: “Put yourself in the shoes of the insurer. Why not just deny them all and see which ones come back on appeal? From a cost perspective, it makes sense.”

That medically necessary claims are routinely denied is not something people forced into regular contact with the medical industry as a whole will be very surprised to hear. While exact numbers are hard to acquire, especially on private insurance, a [2023 KFF study](#) found that health insurers reject about 1 in 7 claims for treatment. Indeed, the system of “deny them all and see which ones come back on appeal” appears to be a very successful money making strategy, as the same study found that Americans file formal appeals against denials on 0.1% of claims. It is the ‘three Ds of insurance’ — delay, deny, defend — that the three words left on the shooter’s bullet casings referenced. These three tactics are deployed by insurance companies of all kinds to maximize profits and minimize insurance payouts. Delay: delay victims by having them fill out different forms, telling victims forms were filled out incorrectly, that their claim isn’t covered, that their claim is too late. Insurance companies can burn resources on this process their victims usually cannot, and they lean on them giving up on claims rather than continuing to fight through the process. Deny: outright denying claims works wonders when so very few people have the time and energy to appeal denials or feel intimidated about going up against insurance company lawyers. Defend: victims have to take the company to court, which usually prolongs proceedings for years more with relatively minimal payouts for successful cases.

Insurance companies make their money by keeping on patients who only have occasional healthcare costs and are highly incentivized to deny care to patients with more medical needs. Patients who need accessibility devices, specialty care, or numerous medical tests are bad investments. Another [KFF study](#) in 2023 found that patients who use health services more receive more health insurance denials: 27% of patients who visited a healthcare provider more than 10 times within the past year had their claims denied, 13% more than patients who had fewer than 3 visits. Health insurance companies hand the most denials to sick and disabled patients, patients that tend to struggle most with having the time, energy, and capacity to fight against wrongly denied claims. These are the practices that have allowed health insurance companies to make record profits year after year while health outcomes and life expectancies decrease.

The U.S. spends nearly [twice as much](#) on healthcare as comparably wealthy countries and still has worse health outcomes. It's estimated that [roughly 25%](#) of U.S. healthcare spending is wasteful, at least \$760 billion every year. Accounting for the largest portion of that waste is administrative costs, much of which due to the burden placed on the system by health insurance companies. The multi-payer healthcare system in the U.S. is a bureaucratic nightmare: each insurer has its own billing codes, regulations, and expectations for prior authorizations that require dedicated staff to manage. The U.S. has [44% more administration staff](#) than Canada, for example, and U.S. physicians spend more of their time devoted to administrative tasks than doctors in other wealthy countries. While the number of U.S. physicians [grew 150%](#) between 1975–2010, proportional to the population, the number of healthcare administrators increased by 3,200% in the same time period. As the nonclinical administrative burden continues to climb, so has, of course, the executive salaries. In the ten years between 2005 to 2015, pay for major hospital CEOs increased by [93%](#). The CEOs of the 6 largest health insurance companies together made [\\$114.5 million](#) in 2022 and their compensation is [steadily rising](#) with every passing year.

While the healthcare executives have been raking in higher and higher profits poor and working-class people have been accumulating medical debt. [41% of adults](#) in the United States have some form of health care debt and 6% of adults owe over \$1,000. Just in 2024, the cost of family life insurance premiums [increased by 7%](#) and has increased a total of 52% since 2014. Over a million people in the U.S. have been killed by the COVID-19 pandemic allowed to run unchecked and [at least 23 million](#) have been thus far disabled by it. These are the conditions the produced the assassination of Brian Thompson, and it is little wonder why many people found it easy to deny their sympathy to a man who profited so much from denying them healthcare.

The Shooting and The Search

The assassination of the CEO of UnitedHealthcare took place in perfect view of a nearby surveillance camera. The shooter — who would be hunted with every surveillance capacity the State had at its disposal — began first by subverting the very purpose of the apparatus. Cameras used to suppress dissent and protect the ruling class were co-opted to broadcast direct action against them and demonstrate its relative simplicity. Brian Thompson walked to the annual UnitedHealthcare investor's conference entirely alone. The event's time, place, and location was publicly available. He had no security detail or bodyguards. The shooter had time to take their shots, clear a gun jam, take another shot, and get away without being stopped. It would be another three minutes until police arrived and Brian Thompson was pronounced dead 30 minutes later.

It was a violent direct action that caught the rapt attention of ruling and oppressed classes alike. The ruling class switched into high alert at the same moment that poor and working-class people started a gleeful celebration of the act. Everyone saw how trivial the action was, saw Thompson fall like any other mortal man despite his millions. From the start it was imperative for the State to capture the shooter to demonstrate to the public the futility of escape for any insurgent who might follow the example before them. Enforcement arms of the State like the NYPD and the FBI spared no expense in the search for the shooter and in doing so demonstrated how much more the life of a CEO matters to them than the life of any of the many other murder victims in

the city. To do so, they utilized the surveillance system the shooter had momentarily subverted and turned it back towards its original purpose.

New York City has more surveillance cameras than any other city in the United States. In their search for the UHC CEO assassin, [the NYPD accessed](#) 60,000 state-owned cameras and thousands of privately owned cameras installed across NYC using their Domain Awareness System: the largest digital surveillance system in the world, designed in partnership between the NYPD and Microsoft in 2012. The Domain Awareness system uses AI to [search terms](#) that cops try to use to narrow down the excess of surveillance data they have to comb through. They can type in terms like ‘backpack’ or ‘bike,’ but one can imagine how many results this might produce in a place like NYC. For the cameras NYPD didn’t have direct access to, they had to send cops to private businesses and homes with security cameras to obtain access to their footage. Ultimately, no special or magic police technology could bypass the necessity for real human beings to spend their labor hours combing through recordings in order to construct timeline of the alleged shooter’s whereabouts in the days leading up to and proceeding the assassination. “You might have to look through 100 hours of video to get two minutes that’s usable,” said Carlos Nieves, the NYPD’s assistant commissioner of public information in a [December 6th news conference](#).

The timeline police constructed and have presented to the public suggests that the shooter arrived in New York on November 24th and checked into Hi New York City hostel — located in the Upper West Side of Manhattan — where the desk clerk requested a hooded and masked person pull down their mask to reveal their face. The images taken from the hostel’s security footage remain the only ones that captured the alleged shooter’s full, unmasked face. On December 4th, the day of the shooting, NYPD claims that the alleged shooter left the hostel at 5:35am and was walking around the Midtown Hilton hotel by 5:41am only 6 minutes later: a distance that takes approximately 20 minutes to travel by car, bike, and public transportation. There the shooter allegedly stopped in a nearby Starbucks before waiting on a bench until 6:45am when the shooter saw Brian Thompson, approached him from behind, and shot the CEO multiple times. After this, according to the NYPD narrative, the shooter rode an ebike into Central Park — where there are far less security cameras than the rest of NYC — where they allegedly ditched their backpack (containing only a Tommy Hilfiger jacket and monopoly money, according to police.) NYPD claims to have caught the alleged shooter again on camera, still on a bike, outside of the park at 85th Street and Columbus Avenue. A camera on 86th Street captured the alleged shooter, on foot this time, where they got into a cab that supposedly took them to a Port Authority bus station off 178th Street, which the police claim to have recorded them entering. In the police narrative before the eventual arrest, [NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said](#) “We don’t have any video of him exiting, so we believe he may have gotten on a bus.” It was only after Luigi Mangione’s arrest in Altoona, Pennsylvania that police [amended their narrative](#) and declared they believe the alleged shooter left the city by train instead. NYPD has since claimed to have video footage that demonstrates that their suspect left George Washington Bridge bus station, went south to Penn Station and left New York City by train to Philadelphia. At time of writing, the police have not shared any new information they gathered about the shooter’s alleged whereabouts in the five days that passed between the shooting and Mangione’s arrest in the Altoona McDonald’s.

NYPD released multiple images taken from surveillance footage to the public in the following days, and it is notable that *none* of their best images that they claimed captured the shooter's face were extracted from cameras installed by the police. The first photos — released the day of the shooting — were taken from a surveillance camera in a Starbucks at 1290 Sixth Avenue in Midtown and depicted a hooded and masked figure: only their eyes, brows, and upper bridge of their nose visible. The next set of photos released on the following day, the photos police would [cite](#) as the most important pieces of evidence to eventually lead to the arrest of Mangione, were supplied by the Hi New York City hostel (on Amsterdam Avenue on the Upper West Side) and showed a person police alleged was the shooter pulling down a facemask and smiling. The third set of photos released during the police search were shared with the public on December 8th, four days after the assassination, and were photos taken from a taxi's dashcam. The police claimed these photos to be of the shooter on the morning that the assassination took place, but they depicted a person in a differently styled jacket and a blue surgical facemask rather than the black facemask worn by the alleged shooter in other surveillance images from that same day. It seems worthwhile to repeat that the accuracy of the publicly presented narrative — whether it faithfully followed the travels of the same masked individual instead of taking several different masked and hooded people for being the same — is far from certain and worthy of doubt considering that its source is the police.

For all of the resources the cops burned in the hopes they could show off their sparkly authoritarian technology, they were ultimately as dependent on the public volunteering to do their jobs for them as they have always been. Until a satisfactory target was delivered to them, the NYPD floundered on the public stage, unable to find someone to arrest for the shooting until 5 days after Thompson was killed.

Public Response

Once the assassination was made public, even before the NYPD had suspect photos to share, there surged a widespread sentiment for and identification with the shooter. All attempts by the ruling class to suppress this have seemed only to feed it. The message of the act was so clear, such a direct expression of the anger that so many feel towards the mass murderers seated in lofty executive offices, that no more information about the shooter was required for many to see that their own political interests aligned more with the masked assassin than with the gunned down CEO. How could they not, when [6 in 10 adults](#) have had problems with their insurance coverage — surprise bills, service denials — within just the last year?

On the day of the assassination, according to [a report by the Network Research Contagion Institute \(NCRI\)](#), 6 of the top 10 most engaged posts on Twitter that mentioned Brian Thompson or UnitedHealthcare expressed support for the shooting. In the report, the NCRI notes that this kind of support is not new but was “once largely confined to niche online subcultures.” In the wake of the UHC CEO assassination, however, they claim we are “now witnessing similar dynamics emerging on mainstream platforms.” Alex Goldenberg, senior advisor at the NCRI, [told NBC](#) “The framing of this incident as some opening blow in a class war and not a brutal murder is especially alarming.” An [Emerson College poll](#) found that 41 percent of participants between the ages of 18 and 29 said they found the assassin's actions acceptable. Wanted posters listing other corporate executives were pasted around New York, shared widely

on social media, and [dubbed by police](#) as ‘hit lists.’ Two weeks after the shooting, the NYPD had the tires on 14 of their vehicles destroyed, [the anonymous statement](#) about that act reads: “Like Luigi Mangione just showed, stop being helpless in the face of our problems. Take them out instead.” While Mangione was being held at the State Correctional Institution Huntingdon in Pennsylvania, incarcerated people there [initiated a live broadcast interview](#) by shouting “Luigi’s conditions suck!” and “Free Luigi” from the windows to a NewsNation crew standing outside the prison’s fenced perimeter. A highway sign [in Seattle was hacked to read](#) “One less CEO. Many more to go.” Delay, Deny, Depose appeared in banner drops and graffiti around the world. People took the opportunity to share stories about the violence inflicted upon them and their loved ones by insurance companies, and facts about their greed and earnings became more widely distributed than ever.

The prolific positive sentiment seen in the wake of the shooting could be a hopeful indication of increased support for violent direct action against the ruling class. However, what also accompanied that affinity on a massive scale was not the kind of solidarity that can expand insurrectionary capacities but instead the social-media enhanced gamification of police collaboration. Every surveillance image extracted and shared by police of hooded and masked people in New York in their search for the assassin went instantly viral: shared by people who supported the act and wanted the shooter to escape with equal fervency to those who wanted the shooter hunted down and destroyed. The most complete image was the subject of memes, art, and lookalike contests. While the NYPD flew drones over NYC, walked their police dogs around, scuba-dived in lakes, and tried to get their facial recognition technology to solve it for them the public shared the alleged shooter’s wanted photos enthusiastically and committed their face to memory. This collaboration is what finally allowed the State to capture a suspect: Luigi Mangione. In reference to the eventual arrest, NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch [told the press](#): “I want you to know that this apprehension was another in what has become a series of joint efforts involving different crimes between the police and the public.”

Arrest

On December 9th, 5 days after the assassination. Luigi Mangione was arrested at a McDonald’s in Altoona, Pennsylvania after being identified by an employee and several customers as looking similar to the surveillance photos released by police. An employee called the Altoona police who came and arrested Mangione: since charged with the murder of the UHC CEO. It has been claimed by police that Mangione had on his person an ID that matched the fake ID used by the alleged shooter, a 3D printed handgun that seemed to be similar to the weapon used in the shooting, a notebook filled with plans for the assassination, and a 2-page handwritten manifesto. The content of the manifesto has been largely withheld from the public by mainstream media outlets, but was [leaked to and published](#) by independent journalist Ken Klippenstein, its contents [later confirmed](#) by police to The Daily Beast as aligning with the contents of the manifesto held in evidence. The manifesto begins with an expression of appreciation for the Feds, the work they do, and a desire to make their jobs easier by handing them the following confession. It declares “This was fairly trivial: some elementary social engineering, basic CAD, a lot of patience.” The rest of what follows is a recrimination of the healthcare industry and an acknowledgement that while the writer was a person who was allegedly willing to act directly against the system, they do not “pretend to be the most qualified person to lay out the full

argument.” Whether Mangione himself wrote the document, whether he did so authentically as the person who pulled the trigger on Brian Thompson, and whether he truly did have all of the evidence police claim he had on his person has yet to be proven, but it is not unthinkable either.

In the immediate aftermath of Mangione’s arrest there have, predictably, risen countless conspiracy theories about his capture. Prominent among them were theories that declared Mangione to be the shooter but claim it to be unthinkable that regular people would be able to identify him on sight after seeing five days of viral surveillance photos. Therefore, the theory goes, the story of Mangione’s arrest is an artful parallel construction by police when they really found him using secret, accurate beyond the highest industry standards, supposedly ubiquitous, facial recognition software embedded in a McDonald’s self-order kiosk, or something similar. Conspiracy theories like these do not make people aware of the nature of the threat that is State surveillance, nor do they nurture their reasonable suspicion of cops and the State in ways that will empower them to both protect themselves *and* act. This can only be done by, to the best of our abilities, describing the actual terrain of the political environment we are acting within. The myth making around the Mangione arrest consistently does — as conspiracy theories always do — the work of our enemies by exaggerating and aggrandizing their organizational and logistical capacities. While the cops and the ruling class certainly don’t want us to know all the particulars of their surveillance apparatus, they *do not* want to seem incapable. Seeming incapable or incompetent goes directly against their best interests. Their power, generally and especially in a case like this, depends on a public demonstration that if you take militant direct action against those in power there will be nowhere for you to hide and that their ultimate victory is inevitable, even when it is anything but.

We need not be forced to choose between either taking cops at their word or filling in the gaps of reasonable doubt with our own speculations. Instead of outright trusting *or* totally rejecting information, we can navigate what is presented to us with an awareness of the informational environment it exists within. It demands an understanding of how the different institutions involved — and their embedded contexts within the whole of the authoritarian system, formed and made real by individuals — interact with one another, have overlapping interests, and at times interests at odds with one another. Avoiding conspiracy thinking requires knowing how the cops think, the prosecutors think, the health insurance company executives might think, the media executives might think, etc. They are all components of systems acting in the interests of systems, yes, but also individuals endowed with foreword awareness as well as flawed people with necessarily limited scope. This does not make them less dangerous or less deadly. It makes them knowable and therefore fallible.

The claim that Mangione was not reported to police by regular people in an Altoona, Pennsylvania McDonald’s cannot be made without extensive conspiracy theorizing. One of the customers involved in identifying Mangione can be seen [here](#) making what I hope in the long run will be a profound regret for him: talking, face unobscured, to reporters about witnessing the arrest and his role in it. Constructing this story from nothing would require an extensive coverup with no loose ends or potential leaks that could reasonably withstand the intense international attention and public scrutiny this story has drawn. Further, it exaggerates police capacities in such a way that bolsters the image of their power and, in truth, aligns more closely with the spin the police have since been attempting to put on the story of Mangione’s capture.

Looking at the motives of police and the way they have shaped this narrative thus far, we can see that they have a powerful interest in a narrative that aggrandizes their skills and makes would-be insurgents see capture as inevitable. After Mangione's arrest, Jessica Tisch [told the media](#) it was made possible by a "combination of old-school detective work and new-age technology." When NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny [talked to reporters](#), he claimed to have an "enormous amount of forensic evidence, an enormous amount of video" but admitted that the public release of the surveillance photo of the alleged shooter's exposed face to be the most important. Their narrative — that there's nowhere to hide from the police state — depends on connecting the unfathomable resources they burned in the search for shooter to the result of his capture. If the story of Mangione's arrest was in fact constructed, it was constructed with little mind to what would make the police look impressive. It tells a rather mundane story that illustrates just how dependent on the cooperation of the general public police are in order to effectively suppress dissent and protect the interests of the ruling class. Indeed, the steady trickle of police claims that have followed the arrest which serve to make them seem more powerful or otherwise suggest that their success would have been inevitable even without members of the populace volunteering to do their jobs for them — most such claims based on pseudoscientific police forensics—are far more worthy of doubt than the story of the arrest itself.

Beyond the incongruence between the story as we know it and the interests the police could be expected to express in a story they fabricated, beyond the extensive logistics such a cover-up would demand, sits the actual surveillance capacities the State has on hand. Such capacities are increasingly dangerous for insurgents, absolutely, but not nearly as impressive or omnipotent as conspiracy theorists assert. The police *do* use AI, facial recognition software, and the ubiquity of surveillance cameras to track down and incarcerate insurrectionaries and other dissidents. The honing of these technologies, the alliances made between police and capitalists to share information, are all real threats. These threats, however, do have material limitations, much to the frustration of state agents. For example, that the alleged shooter was consistently masked and hooded through nearly the entirety of the time police tracked them through NYC made using facial recognition to achieve their capture yet another dead end. Two days after the shooting, retired NYPD detective Herman Weisberg — now managing director at private investigations agency Sage Intelligence — [told the New York Post](#): "This man was wearing a mask, which could hinder facial recognition software because it recognizes points in the face and measures the distance between them." Facial recognition technologies are becoming rapidly more accurate and police departments have long been the first to test out those technologies, but their tendency to aggrandize the scope and accuracy of police forensics is well known and not to be forgotten here. Even the most accurate facial recognition software [loses significant efficacy](#) when the subject's face is obscured, the camera quality subpar, the subject is at a distance, blurry, obscured in a crowded place, or if there are no clear photos of the subject in the database the FRT is comparing images to.

The draw to theorize conspiracies about the arrest avoid reckoning with the serious implications written clear in the more mundane story: that instilling norms of interpersonal surveillance and collaboration with the police is a necessary condition for the function of the broader surveillance state. The cameras that captured the most valuable images in the state's search for the shooter and in their charges against Mangione were not owned and operated by the NYPD but by private businesses. Discussing the technology he anticipated the NYPD would use in their hunt for the

shooter, former NYPD chief of department Kenneth Corey [told CNN](#) “And remember that not all of that technology belongs to the NYPD or belongs to government. It’s really being able to leverage that technology and to piece it all together.” It is unclear whether Hi New York City Hostel or Starbucks had their footage merely requested by police, if it was obtained by warrant, or if they were among the businesses that have registered to give NYPD real-time access to their camera feeds through the ‘Connect New York’ program (operated by surveillance technology company Fusus by Axon) since it [was announced](#) by NYC Mayor Eric Adams in May of 2024. What is clear is that every single active security camera is a threat and anything captured on one will be vulnerable to cooptation by police regardless of its original intended purpose.

The cops begged the public to do their jobs for them and while they were still filming themselves beating bushes with batons in Central Park five days into their ‘search,’ the public spread the word and served someone up. A NYPD wanted poster was shared virally and, more likely than not, some unremarkable people in an Altoona McDonald’s thought Luigi Mangione looked an awful lot like the alleged shooter and reported him to local police. This isn’t a necessarily lesser danger than any grand omnipotent surveillance conspiracy theory. In counterinsurgency operations, one of the most important goals for counterinsurgents is to separate and isolate insurgents from the general population. Insurgencies that have popular support are dangerous because insurgents can more easily melt back into the populace — appear to be a noncombatant like any other — when they are protected by them. When the populace is supportive of insurrectionary acts, they (generally) don’t collude with police, don’t give tips to invading forces, provide sanctuary, or just look the other way at key moments. The enforcement arms of the State cannot work if they cannot meaningfully extend into the populace at large. If cops were forced to become a true social island, their ability to make the State real would collapse. Their ability to look from the eyes of a neighbor and the accompanying fear that they could look from the eyes of *any* neighbor is what keeps many subservient to law even in the physical absence of police. The gamification of police collaboration seen in the aftermath of the UHC CEO assassination *is* deeply concerning for this reason. However, I believe that unlike theories that aggrandize the State’s capacities to such an extent that they necessarily insist any resistance to be futile, material analysis of political conditions allows points of intervention to be revealed, allows us to adjust to risk rather than becoming nihilists about risk.

After Arrest

The day after his arrest in connection with the UHC CEO assassination, Luigi Mangione was briefly seen publicly when he was brought by police to his arraignment in Pennsylvania. Immediately after emerging from a police car [he shouted to reporters](#), “It’s completely out of touch and an insult to the intelligence of the American people and their lived experience!” as four cops rushed him into the courthouse: slamming him bodily into a metal door on the way in. The cops in Pennsylvania seemed to feel an urgency to have little seen or heard from this man, perhaps in fear of stoking the flames of public interest and approval. A prudent impulse, to my analysis, but one that was soon abandoned by state officials who — it seems — couldn’t resist an opportunity to cash in on Mangione’s rising fame.

Mangione waived his right to an extradition hearing and was flown to New York on December 19th, and the helipad he landed on was made the stage for an absurd and rather poorly considered

piece of political theater. For there, awaiting his arrival, was a group of more than fifteen men — consisting of members of the NYPD, FBI, and NYC Mayor Eric Adams — who were absolutely *desperate* to get their pictures taken with him. In a spectacle so grand it only served to emphasize everything its authors intended to diminish, this large group of heavily armed men surrounded Mangione (handcuffed, unarmed, and clad in an orange prison jumpsuit) and walked him slowly the short distance between the helicopter landing site and the police van they bundled him into. “I wanted to send a strong message with the police commissioner that we are leading from the front.” [Adams said](#), to explain his strange place in Mangione’s crowded entourage, “I am not going to just allow him to come into our city. I wanted to look him in the eye and say you carried out this terroristic act in my city, the city that the people of New York love. And I wanted to be there to show the symbolism of that.”

Predictably, perp walking a rising folk hero with exaggerated police force at the behest of a city mayor who is [facing federal corruption charges](#) did not suppress the public’s sense of affinity with the symbol of Mangione nor tarnish its glamor. It only added to it and inspired depictions of Mangione as Jesus Christ and Superman. If Adams hoped that the spectacle would distract from his own legal troubles, he must have been sorely disappointed when Mangione’s lawyer, Karen Friedman Agnifilo, [brought them up](#) in the following Monday’s arraignment hearing when she accused the mayor of using her client as “political fodder” and videos of her doing so went viral. Members of the State planned to make a demonstration of force to induce the public to tremble and cower, but what they did instead was exaggerate the point originally made in the UHC CEO’s assassination: there’s no end to the resources the State is willing to expend in order to assure the well-being and ease-of-mind of rich and powerful capitalists. The murder of one insurance executive is worth the cost of surrounding one handcuffed man with a host of militarized cops and the mayor of the city to walk 20 yards for no other reason than for symbolism’s sake.

In keeping with the established strategy of bringing the hammer down as brutally as possible, on December 17th Mangione was hit with 11 state charges and 9 federal charges, to which he plead not guilty. Most striking among [the charges](#) is the New York state first degree murder charge that alleges Mangione killed Brian Thompson “in furtherance of an act of terrorism.” Charging Mangione with murder in the first degree using [New York terrorism law](#) means the prosecution intends to prove that Mangione murdered Thomson with the intention to “intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policies of a unit of government by intimidation or coercion, and affect the conduct of a unit of government.” At [the press conference](#) where the prosecution announced the charges, NYPD’s Deputy Commissioner Rebecca Weiner stated that the public’s reaction of support to the shooter and the corresponding concern “not just from CEOs, but from corporations broadly” is what shows that the shooting fits within a law against violence designed to intimidate a civilian population, referencing a “torrent of online threats” as evidence. It seems contradictory to reference the public’s response of support towards the shooter while claiming that this action was intended to intimidate or coerce that same population. To do so effectively may require the prosecution to redefine “civilian population” so that it can be used to refer to the specific and miniscule population of corporate executives or to specific industries. Or they may have to make an equivalency between government policy and corporate policy or otherwise suggest that crimes against corporations be considered with equal severity as crimes against the State. If this charge is successful, it would set a dangerous precedent and expand the reach of

New York's terrorism law. Its inclusion in the charges brought against Mangione is yet another example in this case of how the life of a health insurance CEO is valued by the State, so much so that its prosecutors claim them to be government assets.

On Mangione

Mangione's arrest has inspired a rush of hero worship. Journalists and self-appointed sleuths alike combed every fragment of Mangione's social media presence that could be found. Reactionaries celebrated the right-wing content that filled much of his twitter profile while the left either ignored its existence or declared it proof that "class unification across ideologies" — was possible, imminent, and desirable. Mangione's alleged Goodreads list — filled with titles you would be unsurprised to find on any average grey tribe tech bro's bookshelves — was examined in fervent detail and his reviews shared as proof of either unique genius or singular maliciousness. Mangione's image as a young, conventionally attractive white man from a wealthy family has certainly played a role in his cultural lionization.

There is a popular tendency to both oversimplify and conspiratorialize (to do one is often to do the other) the political motivations of the right-wing. Regardless of whether or not Mangione is the shooter, it is certainly not unthinkable that he, or someone like him, could be. What is claimed to be known about Mangione is "known" only from police reports, extrapolations from fragments of his alleged online presence, or the occasional story shared with the press by one of his family members or former friends. From this information, Mangione seemed to hold politics that are neither more extreme, more advanced, or any more interesting than one would expect from the average center-right wing white man of his class background and context. Growing up among poor and working-class right-wingers, I'm hard pressed to think of any that I knew who I can imagine not empathizing to some degree with the shooter, or with what is known about the alleged shooter, Mangione, thus far. Many of them would mirror the values expressed in the manifesto: a certain reverent devotion to figures of authority "To the Feds, I'll keep this short, because I do respect what you do for our country" even as they knowingly and deliberately break laws they generally distrust or are actively hostile towards. The idea of "doing what must be done" and then submitting to the so-called legitimate and proper authorities has long been a popular and romantic story trope in a large cohort of the political right.

Additionally, hatred of health insurance CEOs is not a feeling uniquely held by the left. It is, in fact, a very common sentiment gained by nearly every person who has had to engage with the medical industrial complex on a regular basis and does not inherently indicate one holds a radical analysis of systems of domination. If what has been found about his social media presence has been accurate, Mangione struggles with chronic back pain from spondylolisthesis: a condition where one of the vertebrae of the spine slips forward. Some moments of shared sentiment like this, however, does not indicate a special location where "ideological differences" (i.e. conflicts about whether or not white supremacy, misogyny, transphobia, and ableism are acceptable) can or should be set aside to bring about a fantastical unified working-class revolution. Hatred of certain members of the ruling class has been embedded in right-wing rhetoric and politics for decades. The conditions of our conflict with right maintains, as must any conflict when the stakes are the dignity, agency, and lives of the marginalized.

That all said, all public knowledge of Luigi Mangione's politics, at time of writing, has been extrapolated from social media posts from accounts that stopped posting 6 months before the shooting on December 4th. It is impossible to say much of anything concrete about his beliefs with certainty, and likely will be for some time. At this moment, I'm as little interested in declaring that he be marked an irredeemable reactionary and the politics of his case be abandoned as I am in joining the many on the left who take the State's narrative as truth and make him their hero. True to events or not, Mangione has been made by both the State apparatus and the wider public the symbolic representative of the shooter and their insurrectionary act and that is a dynamic that needs to be accounted for in a radical response. He is a political prisoner and solidarity can be expressed to him on that basis without speaking like Eric Adams has, as if his guilt is a foregone conclusion.

Solidarity actions like the court support that has reliably awaited Mangione outside his every court appearance so far is encouraging to see. Many of them set a great example in their praxis which I believe, if followed by those invested in his case, has real potential to expand collective power and agency beyond the ephemeral energy surrounding Mangione's celebrity. Many of the court supporters wore a uniform much like the shooter's: dark clothes, a pulled-up hood, and a face mask. While plenty specified Mangione in their protest, many others held up signs that recentered the original message the State is trying to suppress with his punishment: "Deny, Defend, Depose," "Insurance Lobbyists Line Politician's Pockets: \$117 Million in 2024 Alone," "Healthcare Greed Kills More Than A Bullet," "Privatized Healthcare Is A Crime Against Humanity," and more. Multiple protestors rebuffed reporters entirely (more please!) and those who didn't invariably spoke about the devastation the medical industrial complex has inflicted upon them or their loved ones.

These kinds of solidarity actions with Mangione and around his trial seem fruitful to me in the way that the shallow hero worship of him cannot be. Like it or not, he has been rendered (to his detriment, let that not be forgotten) into a symbol of violent direct action against members of the ruling class. His case is laden with the same corrupted interests that were challenged so boldly that December 4th morning and resonates with people so widely for that very reason. Luigi the person has the capacity to one day disappoint in a way the UHC CEO shooter as an idea and their act as an example cannot: a solid basis to reject and discourage raising him to heroic heights to which no one could hope to follow. It seems more than possible to not neglect Mangione the person and political prisoner in need of actionable solidarity while continuing to bring focus back to the conditions of struggle that the assassination of Brian Thompson agitated.

Ruling Class Reaction

The State is fully committed to its narrative that alleges Mangione as the person who gunned down the CEO of UnitedHealthcare. It appears to be resolute in its strategy to make a public spectacle of brutalizing him in order to discourage anyone from taking lessons from the shooting that empower them towards militant direct action. Eric Adams referred to the importance of symbolism in his choice to participate in Mangione's perp walk, and indeed every aspect of this case is a fight over symbols and narrative. From the moment Brian Thompson breathed his last, it has been imperative for the State to capture the person who pulled the trigger as rapidly as possible and destroy them before the public eye. Yet, each attempt to crush out the strength of

the symbol — from the perp walk to the terrorism charges — does little but strengthen the public's attachment and sense of affinity with it. The direct action was taken against the head of a corporation in an almost universally detested industry whose profit is extracted by denying care. It was — by Commissioner Jessica Tisch's [own admission](#) on the day of the shooting — a targeted attack from someone who took care not to hit bystanders and evaded capture for a minimum of five days. I sincerely doubt there is anything the State can do to tarnish the UHC CEO assassin's star status, even if they throw the book so hard at Mangione that he faces life in prison or a federal death sentence. The shooting was the declaration and every piece of political pageantry on the State's part since has served as a resounding supporting argument: some lives are valued far more than others. To the ruling class, Brian Thompson being shot to death is a tragic murder and the millions hurt or killed by his orders over the years are just the cost of doing good business.

On messaging, they are in lock-step, regardless of proclaimed political affiliation, all agreed to launch a joint campaign of scolding and paternalistic tsking. Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro — who only three months before got a photo-op signing military missiles bound for Ukraine — [responded to](#) public glee at the CEO's death by asserting "Violence can never be used to address political differences, or to address a substantive difference, or to try and prove some ideological point. That is not what we do in a civilized society." Donald Trump is both [confused and disgusted](#) by the popularity of the shooter despite himself being a man who builds power through making a spectacle of violence: "Maybe it's fake news, I don't know. It's hard to believe that can even be thought of, but it seems that there's a certain appetite for him. I don't get it." CNN's Jim Acosta scolded his audience and reminded them that "[Thompson] has a family and it's completely uncalled for, full stop!" Laughable is their apparent shared belief that people who feel so wronged by the health insurance industry that they are driven to celebrate in the wake of the assassination of one of its representatives would be unfamiliar with the lasting impact of death and loss.

Despite the ruling class's desperate assertions to the contrary to get everyone to settle down nicely, there is not — nor has there ever been in the history of the settler colonial project that is the so-called United States — a socially agreed upon sanction against murder. There is not even agreement on who it is *possible* to murder because who is considered fully human is itself a matter of constant contention. Jordan Neely, a homeless Black man and Michael Jackson impersonator, was strangled to death by Marine veteran Daniel Penny while two other men held him down and a subway car full of passengers watched without intervening on a Monday afternoon in New York City. The same NYPD that spared no resource to hunt the CEO shooter down released Penny without charges after a few hours of questioning. When charges eventually came, they only came for Penny, not the two other men who helped hold Neely down. During Penny's trial [even the prosecution](#) made sure to repeatedly acknowledge Penny's intentions in restraining Neely to be "admirable," arguing only that he had gone too far. On December 9th, the same day Mangione was arrested, Penny's manslaughter charge was dismissed after a jury deadlock and he was acquitted on the lesser charge of criminally negligent homicide. By the end of the week Daniel Penny was Trump's guest of honor at a football game while Mangione was being charged with terrorism.

Far from a culture-wide sanction against murder, we have a culture that runs on it. The United States in an ongoing colonial project that was built on the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the enslaved labor of Black people and requires these still for its maintenance. Its military industrial complex and imperialistic policy is responsible for a truly unfathomable loss of life throughout its history and at time of writing has not stopped supplying resources to Israel to assist in its project to ethnically cleanse Palestine. At time of writing we are 5 years from the start of a global pandemic that *has not ended* even as it has been ignored. In August of 2023, [Dr. Anthony Fauci justified](#) the State's policy of coerced mass infection and sought to discourage alarm about new variants by devaluing the lives of disabled people: "even though you'll find the vulnerable will fall by the wayside — they'll get infected, they'll get hospitalized and some will die — it's not going to be the tsunami of cases that we've seen," and it is a sentiment that has been echoed by the majority. The maiming and death of disabled people is taken as a necessary cost for empty promises to return to an idyllic past. Our exclusion from social life is framed as a natural — if perhaps pitiable to some — consequence of our propensities to weakness or lack of willpower. "Some will die" was said casually by a powerful man and received just as casually by many who filled in that "some" with the blurred face of a distant Other and felt soothed by the effect.

Executive Security and its Limitations

The ruling class has always wanted and relied upon a popular culture that accepts systematic violence and mass death as part of the natural order of things. What has them scared in the aftermath of one of their own being gunned down in the street and the folk heroization of his killer is that every aspect of the case reveals a mortal vulnerability they are desperate to conceal: members of the ruling class have been able to live their lives in public unimpeded almost entirely by our collective mercy. Seeing the proof of how slim—and apparently waning—that mercy is has put them all to trembling. The proof is plain before us: disrupting the lives of the ruling class is indeed fairly trivial.

Maintaining constant private security is personally invasive, prohibitively expensive, and not as effective as the powerful wish it could be. Personal security is something only the members of the ruling class with high public profiles — CEOs of major tech companies, politicians, celebrities — maintain for themselves full time. Not every CEO can walk around with an Elon Musk-style security entourage of 20 men, nor do many of them want to. Many utilize private security only sparingly, at publicized events, during travel, or when they've been alerted to a new threat. The rest of them never utilize any more security measures than what is supplied to all who attend the wealth segregated events they attend, the private cars and planes they hire, and the gated communities they silo themselves within. Participation in other aspects of social life — to go to the theater, a hotel, a restaurant, a company meeting — all require some measure of passing through public space. Despite appearances, rich people are human beings like any other: they like to move around freely, they like to be in public spaces with their families and friends, they like to have the daily intimacies of life private rather than observed, scrutinized, and managed by a team of ex-cops and military vets. For safety in these public spaces, most of the ruling class simply depends on us not bothering to learn their names and faces and a general unwillingness among those who do to act on that information with violence.

Security is extremely expensive, prohibitively so for all but the ultra-wealthy. [According to Glen Kucera](#), president of enhanced protection services at Allied Universal, the world's largest provider of private security guards, a single day's protection can cost around \$2,500. Full-time security including body guards or a private driver costs \$500,000 a year or more. Tesla [paid \\$2.4 million](#) in 2023 for Elon Musk's comical entourage of suits and Meta spent a staggering \$23 million on private security for Mark Zuckerberg in the same year. High-profile celebrity tech billionaires are distracting outliers that perhaps serve a purpose for the rest of the ruling class: to create the illusion that each and every one of them is so heavily barriered and vigilantly protected. While it is to be expected that these numbers will increase at least somewhat in the wake of the assassination — and certainly if the conditions it exposed are further agitated — [only a quarter](#) of Fortune 500 companies fund personal security to their executives and *none* of the top three insurers (including United Healthcare's parent company UnitedHealth Group) disclosed any personal security costs for their executives in 2023.

Beyond being cost prohibitive, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) requires companies disclose personal security costs for senior executives that exceeds \$10,000 a year. Personal benefit disclosures for executives risk drawing heightened scrutiny of shareholders and potentially sanctions from proxy advisory firms who have [already been critical](#) of the excesses of private security spending in particular. It is conceivable that if conditions become more overtly hostile to the ruling class regulatory agencies may change their policies and free up companies to build their private security forces freer from intervention. Perhaps shareholders will frown a little less at company executive perk packages that burn millions of dollars on security theater if a higher CEO morality rate becomes a more pressing concern: it doesn't bode well for shareholder value if you can't keep company leadership alive.

There has certainly been no want of mainstream news articles proclaiming this to be a foregone conclusion. However, it is notable that many such articles have security company executives as their sources. Dave Komendat (former security chief of Boeing and head of security firm Prescient) was interviewed by [ABC News](#) and [CNN](#) and encouraged companies to bolster their executive security. [USA Today interviewed](#) multiple security firm representatives who either pressed the need for increased corporate investment in their industry or claimed that business was absolutely booming and sure to stay that way. Matthew Peters (vice president of protective services at another security provider, Guidepost Solutions) claimed that calls to his company "at least quadrupled" in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. A surge in frantic security calls between the ruling class and those among them who deal in private mercenaries undoubtedly occurred to some degree. However, it seems still prudent to note that these men have a special interest in using this moment to capitalize on panic to drive fabulously wealthy customers to their businesses. Whether that marketing strategy was effective in gaining long-term customers and corporations actually choose to beef up their executive security apparatuses remains an open question at time of writing. The financial, logistical, and bureaucratic pitfalls for doing so are by no means insurmountable but neither are they entirely insubstantial and are due continued close attention. In the consideration, too, is the lesson many of the ruling class are resistant to but forced now to ponder: that no amount of impressive armed guards, security cameras, or threat risk assessment can protect anyone if the public sees them as an enemy and becomes determined to end their leisurely passage among us.

Business Insider also [interviewed](#) someone in the private security business: Joseph LaSorsa, a former Secret Service agent who runs private-security firm, LaSorsa & Associates. Unlike others of his cohort, LaSorsa admits to the limitations of private security and doubts that their presence would have necessarily changed the outcome of the shooting: suggesting that if Thompson had a bodyguard accompanying him on December 4th they could have both had their backs to the shooter and two people would have gotten shot instead. “I know it sounds extreme, but you’re not going to mitigate a killing if someone’s hell-bent on doing it to you. Sooner or later, they’re going to succeed,” LaSorsa said.

Counterinsurgency Operations

There may indeed be an increased investment in private security for more low-profile corporate executives, but as we have seen there are limits to doing so: economic, social, and logistical. The ruling class simply does not have the enforcement capacity to protect themselves from an overtly hostile populace that feels empowered towards direct action against them, especially should we feel driven to learn the names and faces behind the corporations that are killing us. While undoubtedly advantaged when it comes to control over resources and sheer firepower, the maintenance of State power is disadvantaged by the nature of its project to enforce its sovereignty at all times in all places. The State must assure that all of the massive infrastructure needed to maintain its access to resources is not undermined. As one of their own manuals — The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual — states: “Insurgents succeed by sowing chaos and disorder anywhere; the government fails unless it maintains a degree of order everywhere.” (COIN pg 4) Compared to the high-ratio of security forces required to maintain control over a population in an unstable political environment, “a small number of highly motivated insurgents with simple weapons, good operations security, and even limited mobility can undermine security over a large area.” (COIN pg 4)

In the aftermath of such a poignant proof-of-concept, it has been imperative for the ruling class to do damage control that undermines the lesson. An excess of security theater is to be expected and likely to be advertised widely by corporate media outlets to shore up a badly damaged public image of the powerful as being always distant and untouchable. Whether the demonstrations of strength presented to us on this stage actually aligns with the real defensive capacities of the ruling class should be received with suspicion and trigger further investigation from agitators.

Their goals are to quiet down the public, discourage active dissent, and to restore the social norms that keep them safer than all of their flashy security practices can. We have seen the focus of their priorities quite plainly in their reaction. Within two days of the shooting UnitedHealthcare, Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, and Elevance Health all [took down](#) the pages on their websites that listed the names and bios of their company leadership. Companies like Amazon and Etsy [removed merchandise](#) with the phrase “Deny, Defend, Depose” from their websites. No resources were spared — though nearly all but a select few surveillance video stills appear to be resources wasted — in the hunt for the assassin. No extravagancy of brutality has been withheld in the public spectacle of punishment and humiliation against Mangione, their selected target, in order to discourage anyone from following any part of the assassin’s example.

On the 10th of December, a woman in Florida named Briana Boston had her medical claim denied by her health insurance, Blue Cross Blue Shield. In her frustration, she allegedly told a representative of the company on the phone “Delay, deny, depose. You people are next.” Blue Cross Blue Shield reported her so-called ‘threat’ to the FBI, who called the local police and had her arrested for it. Her bail set at \$100,000 and she was charged with threats to conduct a mass shooting or an act of terrorism. Contrary to misinformation later spread about her case, at time of writing Briana Boston is still being held on house arrest and facing the charges that could incarcerate her for 15 years if she is convicted. Despite no other evidence that Boston was considering carrying out such an act and did not even possess firearms, numerous media outlets and public figures called her ‘the first Mangione copycat.’ Again and again, the objectives of counterinsurgency in this case are in protecting the identities of the ruling class and suppressing public affinity with the act.

Tactical Lessons for Direct Action

This event has made apparent how much of the ruling class depends on both our mercy and ignorance for their lives, peace of mind, and ability to exist in public. We are not dying, we are being killed, and those who are doing it have names and addresses. Most of their names and a large portion of their addresses are publicly accessible. Large blocks of their schedules and where they’re heading next is being advertised on their company social media pages. In my research on the private security of the corporate members of the ruling class, I was struck by how dependent their safety is on the assumption that a majority of people will never bother to learn their names or faces. High-profile celebrities who are widely recognizable may struggle to move through public space, but most of the corporate leaders responsible for the mass deaths of people and our planet are participating with ease in public life. They’re passing through public space unseen and unremarked upon. For militants interested in making life for these killers less comfortable, it seems prudent to continue to push to make their names, faces, and movements more well-known.

It will be important for radicals to find ways to agitate the conditions brought to popular attention by the assassination while resisting the prevailing tendencies to take the State’s narrative for granted and to pour energy into bolstering Mangione's celebrity status. We do not know if Mangione was the assassin and, further, celebrity fascination does not build movements with sustainability. All that we know about the shooter is that they were a person like any other, made remarkable only by their willingness to take violent direct action against a powerful man. What separates them from the millions of people pushed to the edge of desperation under the exploitation of the ruling class amounts to very little: a considered plan, a determination to carry it out, and a willingness to become a high-profile enemy of the State. This reality, demonstrated by the act, is among the most powerful messages sent by the assassination.

There are numerous aspects of the search for the shooter and Mangione’s later arrest that reveal locations of vulnerability insurgents must attend to as well as some sound tactics that might be learned from. The omnipresence of cameras recording streets, businesses, and homes is a treasure trove for police (if, like most troves, time consuming to extract particulars from) and a danger to anyone who seeks to agitate against the status quo. It is reasonable to treat every single surveillance camera as a threat to liberation. Perhaps these threats might be slightly diminished if

there were more serious social norms established against their use and businesses were sufficiently pressured to pull their cameras down, though the fragility of the things themselves and [their vulnerability to direct attack](#) ought not be disregarded.

If attacking and dismantling the surveillance state is a necessary tactic to advance liberatory struggle, so, too, is moving unseen beneath its gaze while it still stands. The shooter of the NYPD's narrative seemed to have an awareness of security cameras (Central Park has less surveillance cameras than most NYC), exclusively used cash (avoiding leaving digital trails), used public transportation to travel (traffic surveillance cameras are constantly tracking and logging vehicle movements by scanning license plates), and *almost always* obscured their features with a hood and mask. These practices seem to have made the cops' efforts to track the shooter down significantly more difficult. Being lax in these practices — like pulling down one's mask for a moment in view of cameras or not obscuring one's eyebrows — could be the mistake that leads to capture. The McDonald's employee who called police to identify (correctly or not) Mangione as the shooter [is reported](#) to have taken particular note of his "eyes and his eyebrows" when taking his order.

Radicals who wish to express affinity with the shooter's act and agitate the same conditions should be, if they are not already, wearing a mask in all public spaces, encouraging and enabling others to do the same, and defending the agency to do so from state incursion. Even if we were to attempt to look at this event in isolation from the ongoing pandemic conditions it is embedded within, it is undeniable that masking is disruptive to the surveillance apparatus and protective to insurgents who wish to evade its gaze. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) [compared multiple facial recognition algorithms](#) on their ability to accurately recognize masked faces: "The algorithm accuracy with masked faces declined substantially across the board. With unmasked images, the best algorithms failed to authenticate a person about 0.3% of the time. But masked images raised even these top algorithms' failure rate to about 5%, while many otherwise competent algorithms failed between 20% to 50% of the time." It should be noted, too, that the NIST tests were done in a much more ideal context for facial recognition software than the contexts it tends to be deployed in by police: using clear images with well-lit subjects rather than the grainy, distorted, and distant photos of many surveillance systems. It's also worth asking: if the police would have been able to construct the narrative they have, or extract any surveillance images that made that narrative coherent, if masking during a pandemic was a widespread social practice? How much more difficulty would NYPD have had in singling out a nondescript masked person if the social norm of masking had been fortified rather than deconstructed and that person could have melted into a sea of nondescript masked people? Again, it is something we cannot know, but anyone who sees the necessity for violent direct action to disrupt the status quo will take these questions seriously. Too much ground has been ceded to the ableist project of coercive mass infection for the sake of returning to a mythical idealized past, a fundamentally fascistic project. It is long past time for the radicals who have submitted to that project to recognize our ability to both obscure our identities from the surveillance state and stop the spread of viral illness as the crucial political territory that it is. It is time to mask up. And also please do take care to cover your eyebrows while you're at it.

Masking and Pandemic Denialism

Masks are incredible tools for obscuring one's identity and complicating the success of the surveillance apparatus, especially when used in tandem with other protective equipment that cover identifying features and sturdy operational security practices. Masks — especially high quality masks designed to protect against airborne pathogens, like N-95 masks — are also important tools that are the most [consistently, undeniably effective](#) in protecting individuals from repeated COVID-19 infection and in reducing public spread, especially when used in tandem with other personal and social protective practices and norms like: cleaning indoor air, quarantining the infected, and making vaccines widely and easily accessible. These are the practices that slow the spread of illness and make it more possible for disabled people to exist in public, participate in social life, and to receive the care we need to survive. All practices that have been summarily abandoned by a majority of people across the political spectrum in the United States, heedless of the COVID-19 pandemic raging on. If we are to speak clearly about the material conditions the assassination exists within, if we are to spend so much time discussing the institutionalized medical neglect as it is expressed by health insurance companies, we must expand the scope of this issue to the entire medical industrial complex, the ideological dominance of ableist eugenics, and the culture of coercive mass infection.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not gone anywhere, it has just been incorporated into government and social policy. Insurance companies are already strategizing about the future they anticipate if there are no further meaningful pandemic interventions: in September of 2024 one of the world's largest reinsurers — Swiss Re — released [a report](#) predicting that excess mortality could remain up to 3% higher than pre-pandemic levels in the United States until 2033. COVID-19 [wastewater data for January of 2025](#) indicates viral activity to be Very High in 15 states and High in 12 states. There have been 1,212,060 confirmed COVID-19 related deaths in the United States, the highest number of deaths of any country and the [17th highest number of deaths per-capita](#). COVID-19 is the [fourth largest cause of death](#). Notable, too, that other causes in the top 10 are illnesses that COVID-19 infection increases the risk for, [like heart disease and stroke](#). With every COVID-19 infection comes an [increased risk](#) of developing chronic health issues like diabetes, kidney disease, and organ failure. Repeated illness does not strengthen the immune system, as some popular myths may have it, but inflames and damages the nervous system and organs, potentially leaving long-term destruction in its wake. As part of the AMA's What Doctors Wish Patients Knew series, Physician [Dr. Rouhbakhsh called](#) being casual about repeated COVID-19 infection “akin to playing Russian roulette.” The promised return to normal has not materialized for anyone. A new normal stands in its place.

That new normal is the systematic dismantling of public health in the service of capitalists' bottom line and the abandonment of disabled people. In May of 2023, the Biden administration ended the state of emergency for COVID-19 that gave millions benefits like Medicaid coverage, paid sick leave, more unemployment benefits, and coverage for Covid testing and vaccinations. After this move over 6 million Medicaid members [were forcibly disenrolled](#) from their health insurance. By September of 2021, legislation that undermined public health measures and infrastructure [had been introduced](#) in all 50 states and 26 of those passed the legislation into law. Among Trump's first orders when he reassumed office in January of 2025 was an order to [withdraw the U.S.](#) from the World Health Organization and another that initiated [a freeze on all external communications](#) from federal health organizations — among them the CDC, the

National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration —to keep them from sharing regulations or guidance to the public until approved by a political appointee.

Anti-mask mandates are becoming a more favored tactic of the ruling class to undermine public health, force consensus to the bi-partisan political program of repeated coerced mass infection, and expand the reach of the surveillance state. Mask bans in the U.S. have a history that predates COVID-19 by nearly two centuries. The first anti-mask law [was passed in New York](#) in 1845 as a suppressive response to a nine-year long tenant's revolt in the Hudson River Valley. Before the start of the pandemic, [17 states and The District of Columbia](#) had preexisting anti-mask laws, and only two of them — New York and D.C.— actually repealed those laws in 2020 after the pandemic began. Enforced via police discretion, like all laws, they have been used as tools of political suppression: to arrest masked Wall Street protestors [in 2011](#), to arrest [anti-fascists](#), [anti-racists](#), and to disrupt movements [against police brutality](#). In May of 2024, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost suggested [in a letter](#) to Ohio's public universities that they threaten pro-Palestinian student protesters with felony charges under the state's 1953 anti-mask law. The next month, New York Governor Kathy Hochul [announced](#) that she was considering a mask ban in NYC in response to pro-Palestinian protestors. In August, New York's Nassau County [passed a modern anti-mask law](#) that bans wearing masks in all public spaces and allows for private businesses to do the same. On the day of Luigi Mangione's arrest, Eric Adams took the opportunity to push again for [anti-mask laws and social norms](#) in a press conference: "We called to say when you go into businesses and establishment, ask people to temporarily remove their mask. We could, we can close these cases in hours when everyone will cooperate and just say temporarily pull down your mask. You don't have to permanently take it off. But once you get that video, once you get that picture." Another direct acknowledgement by a state representative of how crucial that one unmasked photo — whoever it may have depicted — was to capturing a satisfactory target and in building the state's narrative against him.

Masking as a social norm, for the brief and fragile time it nearly was one, was disruptive to the surveillance state and frustrated the ruling class. This is why they were in such a hurry to get us to take them off and for their efforts they achieved a resounding political victory, the consequences of which they are still pushing to see how far they can go. There is no one to stop them from doing so but us. Disabled agitators have not left the front lines of the struggle to protect our collective health, our access to the tools required for that collective health, and our agency to use them, while nearly everyone else has ceded this territory to the State with a sense of relief. Each strike against our collective capacity to mitigate the spread of viral illness is a wound to us all but it is most visibly and immediately a hit to disabled and vulnerable people. This seems to me precisely the reason why the State's moves against collective health have succeeded with barely a mumble of protest from most of the left. Disabled people have, for the whole of our history, had to struggle against our social devaluation. The pandemic has only exaggerated the already dominant values system of ableist eugenics. Even in the earliest months of the pandemic, jokes were made about COVID-19 being a "boomer remover" due to the increased mortality rate experienced by older infected people. It was not long before "they had a preexisting condition" began to be used — as it is used constantly today to downplay the danger of other rising infections like H5N1 — as a means of soothing the anxieties of the self-identified-able-bodied when another disabled person was killed by the virus. Studies in 2020 revealed that Black people were dying from COVID-19 infection at much higher rates than white people and

in 2022 [a research study](#) was published that found that highlighting this disparity to white people *reduced* their concerns about the pandemic as well as their support for safety precautions like masking. The vulnerable die and “fall by the wayside” and there is a general consensus that this must be the order of things, that the steady deaths and further isolation of the disabled, immunocompromised, and socially marginalized is the price that must be paid for this vapid illusion of “normality” we have before us now.

Disability Liberation

If the shooter’s act was — as many claim and to which I emphatically agree — a poignant propaganda of the deed that brought attention to the policy of medical neglect that enriches insurance companies, it cannot be either understood or utilized to its fullest potential without an analysis of ableism more broadly. The pandemic denialism and the mass social abandonment of the disabled cannot and must not be rhetorically disconnected from the shooter’s act. Disability liberation must be centered.

We cannot speak meaningfully of the violence inflicted by the specific industry of health insurance without seeing its location in the medical industrial complex as a whole. For this essay’s subject I have explored the destruction of patient’s lives due to denied or delayed insurance coverage, but medical neglect and malpractice happens every day before a claim ever makes it to insurance to be rejected and without the input of invasive state laws. Pharmaceutical companies use public resources and research to develop medicine that they lock behind patents so only their companies can profit from the discoveries. Then they set the prices for life-saving medications at [upwards of 50 times](#) the original production costs because their patent monopolies allow them to do so. Individual doctors have enormous power over patients with minimal to no oversight, and most do not know how to properly care for disabled patients and undervalue our lives. A [2021 survey](#) of U.S. physicians revealed that only 40.7% were confident about their ability to provide the same quality of care to patients with disability and only 56.5% strongly agreed that they welcomed disabled patients. A [2024 poll](#) of patients across 10 different countries found that 61% of non-disabled people have had a trust-damaging experience with healthcare and for disabled people that number was 78%. Less than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic [came reports](#) that doctors all over the country were putting Do Not Resuscitate orders on the files of patients with learning disabilities. When hospitals stopped their practices of universal testing and masking, [25% more](#) of their patients became infected with COVID-19 because of their stay there.

There is no militant response to the conditions agitated by the UHC CEO assassination that does not center the politics of disability liberation. Disabled people are the largest oppressed social group in the U.S. and in the 5 years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic our numbers have been growing. According to data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of disabled people reported to be in the U.S. [rose nearly 35%](#) from 2020 to the end of 2024 and [1 in 4 adults](#) report having a disability. The actual number of people with disabilities is likely far higher, since many people are disabled without being recognized as such by the State or even by themselves. This is undeniably part of why the shooter became so instantly and widely celebrated. Across the world people watched a video of a health insurance executive shot to death on a street in New York City and saw in the shooter a person who was acting for their

interests. Most people may not yet be radicalized towards disability liberation politics, but the hunger and need for such politics is obviously great.

If the militant reader has thus far neglected to approach the movement for disabled people's liberation with the seriousness the political moment demands, it is time to take steps to amend that. Hesitancy on this score has already cost us lives and, allowed to linger any longer, will cost us many more. The Biden administration made a lot of comfortable space for the liberal style of pandemic-denialism and the Trump administration newly back in power is making moves to undermine already abysmal public health infrastructure. Over and over again, the State has expressed that it experiences masking practices as a disruption to its surveillance capabilities and has acted to suppress their use. Its implications reach into every other area of radical action: anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-transphobia because every axis of social marginalization makes a person more likely to become disabled, more likely to experience medical neglect from doctors, and more likely to die from that medical neglect. This is political ground we cannot afford to lose.

Conclusion

What was identified and has continued to be emphasized is a mass public expression of identification with the shooter's act, a wide hostility to what has been unremittent violence for decades via our so-called healthcare system, and little empathy to be spared for a fantastically wealthy health insurance executive. The shooter demonstrated with flare that our class enemies are far more vulnerable than their posturing encourages us to believe. We live in the same world. We walk some of the same streets. On the condition of anonymity, one terrified corporate executive [told CNN](#) "The big learning is that if you want to kill someone, you can kill them. It's really scary but true. It seems crazy that we're just figuring this out." The members of the ruling class are just as mortal as the rest of us and their lives — as we've just seen — are fairly trivial to disrupt in a big way.

This essay has touched upon only the barest fragment of the reality of the mass violence enacted by and through the healthcare system. No amount of collected data on claims denied can honestly communicate the pain and suffering prolonged, lives lost, bodily capacities systematically destroyed by companies that hold necessary care hostage in order to increase profits for the unfathomably wealthy few. The shooter's direct action resonated strongly with people because so many of us have been in some measure disabled by the process of capital extraction. Labor has always been a lead disabler of the working-class and to be forced to live in pandemic conditions without masks, clean air, accessible vaccines, healthcare, or housing is to be a victim of coerced mass infection. Disabled agitators have shown ourselves prepared to respond to this moment because we never retreated from the conflict in the first place. Other dissidents who packed up and went home when the State told them to are encouraged to mask back up and join us on the front. There is no future for any of us without disability liberation.

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