

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6508>



Covid-19 statement

The pandemic is a symptom of capitalism's sickness: Workers should look to their own survival

- Features - Covid-19 - Statements -
Publication date: Sunday 5 April 2020

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

As we face into a catastrophic viral pandemic the question many are asking is how is it that while the world is fabulously wealthy the funds are not available for a first class health care system? Everything is in short supply!

As we face into a catastrophic viral pandemic the question many are asking is how is it that while the world is fabulously wealthy the funds are not available for a first class health care system? Everything is in short supply!

Profits come first for capitalism. Systematic privatisation drives and funding cuts have left public health services in the leading capitalist states in no position to respond to a health emergency and money is constantly funnelled into private health care providers who now expect to make a fortune on the back of the crisis. Medical production companies profiteer from the crisis themselves and production is hampered further by the profiteering of their suppliers.

The sick and dying economic system that systematically degraded the global environment has taken a life threatening seizure. They are trying to manage that collapse in their own interests no matter what the cost to the old, the poor and the oppressed of the world. The capitalists, fearing for the security of their inhumane system, cynically attempt to turn this disaster to their own advantage so they can ensure that any money spent today can be extracted from the workers when the virus subsides.

The global impact of the COVID 19 virus is a product of late capitalism, the dominant economic system on the planet. Humans share their environment with endless other organisms. Many of these are pathogens that cause sickness and death. Because of this, epidemics are a natural feature of human history and pandemics, by their very definition, become all the more consuming as a result of globalisation.

Much of production is now on a global supply chain. Remote areas, once reserves of native plant and animal species, have been invaded and the local ecosystem destroyed. Forests and local food chains are decimated. Animals are forced out of their habitat and into close contact with other species that normally don't share their environment allowing viral infections to jump from one species to another and on to humans. Native populations are forced to turn to bush meat and in some cases logging companies employ hunters to feed the loggers with cheap bush meats. In the case of this outbreak it appears that the taste for this meat among the expanding capitalist class allowed peasant bush meat producers to enrich themselves by at first marketing and then employing intensive breeding of wild species to supply the carnivorous tastes of the new bourgeoisie.

This contact between humans and rare animals, especially bird and bat species, was predicted in Mike Davis' 2006 book; "The monster is at our door". This contact enormously accelerates the movement of viruses across species and the mutation makes them more dangerous and virulent. These mutations have been a regular feature of late capitalism. MERS, SARS and Ebola were all deadly illnesses. All had limitations that enabled outbreaks to be halted but with Covid 19 the random shake of the evolutionary dice has produced a virus to which we have no immunity and which is contagious even before symptoms have developed.

This pandemic is not by itself overwhelming. China, South Korea and other Asian countries, using different approaches, have successfully contained it. However, for many decades capitalism has grown increasingly parasitic. As profit rates fall in the manufacturing sector, capital becomes increasingly financialised and extracts wealth, not directly from production, but from the realisation of capital, adding extra charges to the costs of day to day living through bank charges, rents, privatisation of public services, and so on.

The pandemic is a symptom of capitalism's sickness: Workers should look to their own survival

In poorer countries the cost of debts swamp the public purse and prevent the development of adequate health services. In advanced capitalist countries that purse has been simultaneously squeezed and raided, with a gradual privatisation of many sectors. Nowhere are the health services adequate to the task.

Britain and the US responded by denying the crisis. The British State advanced the social Darwinist theory of "Herd immunity", that would have allowed the virus to run largely unchecked until the majority had been infected, a policy still being pursued by default in much of the US. The British made a sharp turn when their scientists told them the death toll would be in the millions. The Trump administration cannot hide its disinterest in the survival of the workers and its determination to preserve capital no matter how many die.

Most countries now call for a "flattening of the curve" and produce mathematical models that appear to be based on the propagation of the virus but which are in reality based on trying to manage the demand on collapsing health services. It would of course be possible to ramp up the health sector - if China can build two new hospitals in a few weeks, why not Europe? To do so would be to reverse the long running process of privatisation and governments are struggling to avoid that. During a crisis, as in war, the capitalist State imposes what appears to be a form of socialism on a chaotic system, prioritising the production of necessary supplies. If it does so now, if it socialises health, it may prove very difficult for them to dismantle the system later. However, it should be understood that greater involvement by state in the economy or an expansion of public spending is not socialism (a confusion that owes much to reformism and Stalinism). These interventions - such as the one that is unfolding now - always favour capital. A recent example of this are the emergency measures introduced in response to the financial crisis of 2008 (many of which remain in place) and the decade of crushing austerity which followed. In any crisis the capitalist class will to seek to burden the working class with the cost. Given that those costs associated with the current pandemic crisis are potentially much greater the offensive waged will be even fiercer.

The US is the outlier, a glimpse into the future of other capitals. The unfolding tragedy there is rightly blamed on the incompetence and insanity of Trump, but that is far from the whole story. As one expert remarked, the US does not have a health service, it has a health sector whose main function is to generate profit. Federal public health services have shed tens of thousands of jobs since 2008, before Trump dismantled the leading bodies. How can big Pharma, that deliberately launched the opioid epidemic on US workers, now act to protect them? How can the Democratic Party, busy strangling proposals for a public health system, offer an alternative to Trump?

But the problems of the US economy are wider than health alone. Anne Case and Angus Deaton, economists who first exposed the scandal of big Pharma and opioid addiction, have now produced a new study; "Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism". They point out that;

"(the health sector) was 5% of GDP in 1960 and it's 18% of GDP today. It's eating the economy from the inside out" .

The claim is that Covid 19 has caused an economic crisis but the crisis was already unfolding and in fact is simply the continuation of the 2008 credit crunch. We have had over a decade of austerity, where working people paid the debts of the banks and central banks have provided a flow of cheap money to business. The result has been anemic growth and a recovery that has been marked by growing inequality and concentration of wealth while the mass of the population struggle to survive.

The Marxist economist Michael Roberts dismisses attempts to see the economic crisis as a result of the pandemic;

"the profitability of capital is low and global profits are static at best, even before COVID-19 erupted. Global trade and investment have been falling, not rising. Oil prices have collapsed, not risen".

The pandemic is a symptom of capitalism's sickness: Workers should look to their own survival

The truth is that the debt crisis of 2008 has never been resolved. The financialization of the economy means that many activities rest on fictional capital and are concentrated on the realisation of capital. Gouging the workers at every turn, capitalism is kept afloat by cheap money, the interest rate is now zero, giant tax breaks are handed out to major corporations who then buy back their own bonds and the US Federal Reserve has promised no limit to buying worthless bonds as the music in the stock exchanges is about to stop. The dollar is weaponized against the rest of the world, but its credibility falls as the trillions in debt accumulate. Increasingly military power is used directly to intimidate opponents, but the US is about to be forced out of Afghanistan and seems to rely on sanctions, assassination and bombardment as the main policy tools. The latest act of barbarism is the blockade of medical supplies to Iran, a war crime of the highest order.

Global capitalism is in decline. The US has failed in its attempt to conquer the world. It has torn down the pretence that the UN is any sort of independent mechanism to protect the world's population. The fiasco in Europe shows that an organised international coordination of capital does not exist even on a regional level. There has been a wide retreat to the nation State. This is not viable in a globalised world and can only lead to further disintegration. In the US itself even national unity has proven impossible and separate States are working independently.

The outcome of all of the above is not the burying of class antagonism, but a more intense triple attack on the working class. In the background is the unfolding of the pandemic itself. The capitalists hold back on the provision of necessary resources to the health service and defend the creeping privatisation. Some propose herd immunity. Others believe that the death toll would lead to their own destruction and want to flatten the curve, that is, to limit the rate of infection by isolation techniques so that the tottering health provision can cope.

Recommendations are made to the working class. Recommendations cost nothing! As the crisis unfolds the recommendations become directions, and it then becomes inevitable that the State offers recompense to workers. The class struggle in this area is made more intense as the capitalist system quietly collapses in the background. We face chaos as one section of capitalism advocates a mass die off and another section asks us to imprison ourselves and wait in line to suit the needs of a totally inadequate health service.

Both factions agree that billions should be poured into the stock exchange and banks at our expense. Massive sums are pumped into the stock exchange and another portion is given to big business. Relatively small amounts, focused on just a few areas of deprivation, are offered to maintain the workers. It should be remembered that the workers are expected later to pay the full bill for capitalist bailout with more decades of grinding austerity. The sums allocated to capital are for its own day to day survival and the sums allocated to the workers are based on the ruling class fear of mass uprisings - a very real fear if capitalism fails to contain the virus.

The demands of the workers are very simple . The needs of the masses must come first!

Our lives and health must be preserved. All public health care must be guaranteed as free and accessible. Billions must be poured in to ensure a full service and money and human labour diverted to create a system equal to the size of the Covid 19 challenge.

Workers' incomes must be preserved! Payment of full wages to those prevented from working.

No layoffs and sackings! Many employers have made billions from their workforce only to sack them or offer them unpaid leave at the stroke of a pen. Workers will remain on the payroll until industry is set up again.

No one left behind! The unemployed, the elderly and the ill must receive a living income alongside the employed workers.

The pandemic is a symptom of capitalism's sickness: Workers should look to their own survival

A safe shelter for all! Mortgage payments and rents should be frozen, evictions should be banned and unused property expropriated to provide appropriate shelter for the homeless.

Most importantly, the workers must be in charge! It is not the case that the emergency can best be organised by government commands, by emergency laws, and by the police jackboot! There is plenty of room for direct communication via the internet and at a neighbourhood level. The western media present China's curbing of the virus as the actions of a police State. They merely make excuses for their own inaction and callousness. Those inside the country report that it was united action by all, acting together that proved effective. The collective power of the working-class working in solidarity will achieve a great deal more than the State. Rather than run the risk that emergency legislation will be used to crush the workers movement, we can prepare for a future where the working class will take a direct role in the management of the economy and society.

In responding to the pandemic crisis it is essential for workers to organise independently of the state. An element of this will be the establishment of mutual aid groups within working class communities. However, it has to be recognised that the resources at the disposal of these forms of organisation will be limited. It is only within the sphere of production where workers possess the power to marshal the huge resources that are required to respond effectively to the crisis. The working class movement must chart an independent course that rejects the ruinous capitalist strategies of carrying on as normal or shutting down the economy. This means raising demands that point workers towards exercising some agency and power - whether those are minimal demands for safe working conditions or transitional demands over how production and distribution is managed.

We need an international response and international solidarity. South Korea, Japan and other countries sent medical delegations to China and copied the methods used there. Chinese doctors paused amid the crisis to provide a detailed report to the World Health Organisation. In contrast the US has used Covid 19 supplies as a weapon of war against Iran. Large areas of Africa, Latin America and Asia are being left to rot. Not only is this utterly inhumane, it also guarantees large reservoirs of illness that will allow endless cycles of reinfection.

The workers are not yet on the stage. Governments are panicking about what may come rather than about what is. Socialists can act now to build up communication at a regional and global level and hammer out a common programme of action in preparation for the titanic struggle to come.

28 March 2020

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.