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USA and Covid-19

# Where is the Left on pandemic politics?

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The Left in the United States and many other countries have had little presence in pandemic politics. As Adam Turl said, “The organized socialist Left—reformist and revolutionary—failed to coherently organize around COVID-19, ceding ground to increasingly fascist elements.” In community after community, the Right has organized demonstrations against mask-wearing mandates, vaccination mandates, and other public health measures, including the large and disruptive demonstrations recently by truck drivers and others in Canada. The Left in the United States and many other countries have had little presence in pandemic politics. As Adam Turl said, “The organized socialist Left—reformist and revolutionary—failed to coherently organize around COVID-19, ceding ground to increasingly fascist elements.” In community after community, the Right has organized demonstrations against mask-wearing mandates, vaccination mandates, and other public health measures, including the large and disruptive demonstrations recently by truck drivers and others in Canada.

**The corporate liberals who dominate politics in much of the United States, Canada, and Europe, meanwhile, had for some months been promulgating the idea of a return to normalcy (by which they mean profitability and international economic competitiveness) since it is the retired elderly, workers, and racially oppressed peoples who are doing most of the dying, and since the impact of the pandemic could be simplistically and inaccurately reduced to a question of vaccine refusal among politically reactionary individuals.**

## “Returning to normalcy”

In recent weeks, a more pointed push towards “returning to normalcy” and “treating COVID-19 as endemic rather than an epidemic” to justify this has become hegemonic among Biden administration officials, corporate liberal governors, and media pundits. Although a full explanation of the politics behind this turn may need to await academic treatment in a year or two, it seems to us that the roots of this change lie in the emerging economic situation and the level of working-class activity. For some months now, it has been clear that the pandemic had ushered in a shortage of workers to staff lower-paid service jobs, drivers, warehouse workers, nurses, and other hospital employees. This was enabling a rise in strike activity and considerable pressure on employers to improve pay and working conditions to attract new employees. Further, the shortage of workers was contributing to disrupted supply chains, and thus to inflation. Once the Omicron wave began to recede, the idea that it might be possible to “open up” again without “unacceptably many” immediate deaths, the ruling class had every incentive to emphasize and enact the return to “normalcy.”

A major first push came around opening schools and unmasking students as part of normalization. Opening schools

would be a relief for many parents who have had to go to work every day without childcare, and for other parents who were tired of having their kids around all the time. Further, the number of kids who would get seriously sick would be relatively limited due to the nature of COVID-19 disease (particularly since the number of people who get Long COVID, with its impact on brain size and mental fog, is not systematically tracked by state or local Health Departments or by CDC. The United Kingdom does track such data. These show that in January 2022, over 2 percent of the nation's population had self-reported Long COVID for four weeks or more after they first knew they were infected). Thus, it would be a relatively easy first step towards normalization. Since most pandemic-specific forms of income support and eviction protection have ended or been weakened, and prices have been rising rapidly, this would free parents with child care responsibility to be pushed into seeking jobs, and would make it easier to force people who had been working from home to return to their offices or other workplaces where managerial control could be tighter and productivity increased.

## Low visibility of Left

Throughout this pandemic, the Left has had little visible presence in pandemic politics, which is both a sign of the Left's weakness and a real failure on the part of its leadership. Once again, the very crisis that socialists discuss as being the opportunity for revolutionary change is being missed—and it is a tragedy. At the start of the pandemic, socialists like Mike Davis and Rob Wallace had by far the clearest visions of the roots of the pandemic in capital accumulation processes, and these views were acceptable to a large number of people. For example, during this period, one of this article's authors submitted several articles to public health journals that stated that capitalism was at the root of this pandemic, and explained how this was true. All were published, and none of the claims about capitalism were questioned by any of the peer reviewers or editors. Although public health researchers tend to be social democratic or corporate liberal politically, our prior experience had been that identifying capitalism by name as a root cause of epidemics was consistently challenged by reviewers.

Not only did we know that the pandemic was rooted in capitalism, we understood that the cutbacks of the last 40 years had hollowed out health departments' and hospitals' ability to engage in effective infection prevention campaigns or even to care for patients given the number of people with severe disease. Further, we knew that the economic shutdowns and other public health protections that impose restrictions on business would not fare well politically under a system built on anti-regulatory politics and these measures would also lead to longer-term economic problems for capitalism. A few months into the pandemic, David McNally spoke to a radical New Jersey meeting in June 2020 about how supply chain disruptions would continue for many, many months or years to come, and that this would lead many working-class people to question how they spent their time and to think about basic social change.

Further, socialist activists were involved in a number of the early pandemic labor struggles, such as the strikes and demonstrations of hospital workers to gain access to personal protective equipment and other ways to keep themselves safe and to reduce their workloads and stress. Socialist teachers, along with many others, were active in discussing and planning how to keep schools closed when pandemic conditions made them unsafe, as well as working to provide a good education to children while schools were closed. The Chicago Teachers Union conducted a massive strike around these issues early this year, and received widespread support from community members (although less than in prior strikes), and though the settlement made some gains, it was a disappointment and left many students, teachers, and others at risk.

Socialists are also poised to have a voice in additional labor struggles as part of rank and file movements like TDU or through working with Labor Notes and its various occupational, industry, or union networks, as well as being part of various union organizing efforts. For this to be meaningful as part of pandemic politics, however, we need to have a clearer idea about how to engage the pandemic in ways that will gain widespread worker and community support.

And to repeat: Despite being in a position to build action and support around pandemic issues at its beginning, socialists have in recent months been near-invisible in the mass politics that have addressed the pandemic and the problems it poses for ordinary people. This has not, in our opinion, simply been due to our being shut out of the media. In many ways, it has been our own fault.

Part of the reason for this has been an over-emphasis on elections. Many socialists, both reformists and revolutionaries spent a lot of time campaigning in the 2020 elections out of fear of Trumpism at the same time that electoralism helped to de-energize the upsurge against racism that took part in the middle of 2020. The rapid collapse of the Sanders primary campaign left many socialists deflated and ultimately unclear about what political strategies to pursue under a Biden presidency. In terms of COVID-19, socialists and leaders of established Left organizations have largely not organized mass actions about the pandemic and its race and class implications. Many on the Left have adopted an analysis indistinguishable from that of corporate liberals who, once the vaccine became available, came to see non-pharmaceutical interventions as unnecessary and blamed the pandemic on the unvaccinated (this, despite low vaccination rates among lower-income workers as well as tens of thousands of deaths of vaccinated older and disabled people, largely those who had not received boosters).

## Mutual aid efforts

Many people on the Left got heavily engaged in mutual aid efforts during the early months of the pandemic both because they were meeting people's urgent needs and because they hoped that such prefigurative politics would help to radicalize the people. Unfortunately, although these efforts were extremely useful in meeting needs, and some were groups who were active in the anti-racist mobilizations in the summer of 2020, they do not seem to have led to a lasting wider radicalization, at least so far.

Many leftists also took part in the Black Lives Matter protests, which constituted the largest mobilization in generations. The degree to which the uprisings of 2020 were related to the pandemic is unclear – that stage of the pandemic may have created a sense of solidarity that extended to racist police violence – and one task for the Left is to better theorize and understand their connections.

All during this time, the virus made workers and oppressed communities sick, and killed hundreds of thousands; and people became increasingly tired of the pandemic. The Right made hay of this situation by attempting to redirect people's exasperation away from the government's failure to protect them and towards public health measures themselves. While polling data shows that majorities of people of color and lower-income workers supported public health measures throughout the pandemic (and in fact wanted more), the policies that made these measures more tolerable such as expanded unemployment insurance, paid sick leave, and eviction moratoria ended, leading to needless harm and likely fueling a degree of popular pushback against protections. Additionally, liberals and right-wingers alike developed narratives justifying the mass death that was occurring – these resonated powerfully because they drew upon dominant features of U.S. society including individualism, vindictiveness, and the specters of eugenics and Social Darwinism. These narratives explained that when someone died of COVID-19, it was because they were unfit in one sense (old age, disability) or another (a lack of intelligence or aptitude about making decisions regarding vaccination) and therefore their lives did not matter.

We should have been able to counter this with our well-founded analyses of why people should blame our rulers and the capitalist system whose needs the rulers aim to serve. But we failed to do so adequately.

## The beginning of organized left responses

On the positive side, in recent months a number of new left initiatives have begun to cohere. One of the authors of this piece has been involved with two of them, the People's CDC and Vax-Plus. People's CDC (PCDC), together with other groups, has recently issued *The Urgency of Equity: A Toolkit to Make Schools Safer for All from COVID-19* and an opinion piece in the Guardian. This Toolkit debunks many of the claims made by the Urgency of Now supporters of a return to normalcy, including presenting evidence that masking does not hurt the mental health of kids. It should be politically useful, but its analysis and suggestions face a fierce potential fightback from the supporters of a return to bourgeois normalcy. PCDC has also issued its first "People's Weather/Whether Report" which will be updated on a regular basis and will include estimates of the state of the pandemic in different parts of the United States together with advice about how people can protect themselves and each other. This report will not merely be updated along with the pandemic's evolution and scientific discoveries, it will also be updated based on community feedback. Importantly, its recommendations take seriously the ways in which current CDC advice and the actions of the U.S. and state governments are understating the risks of Long COVID, the risks of infection of older people, and the certainty of continued viral evolution and thus of new strains.

Other COVID-oriented groups have been around longer, such as Marked by COVID, a group mainly of people who have lost relatives to the virus or who have themselves had to endure Long COVID.

All of these groups are to some degree new, and with somewhat still-developing politics, so we hope their members will see and discuss this article and any discussion it stirs up.

## What should left groups and movements do now? A fuller program

There are several ways to address the issue of "what should we do." One is to discuss our policy demands on governments. Another is to discuss what kinds of mass education we might engage in together with community health outreach workers, Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (COSH) groups, and workplace activists about how people can protect themselves and each other in their daily lives. This has been a main focus of PCDC and VAX-Plus so far, but in our opinion, they have not yet taken up how this should address collective action and self-defense at schools and against employers or other powerful groups whose actions threaten public health. A third is to discuss how unions, other worker organizations, and community activists can engage in direct struggles with employers, the state, and the far-right around issues related to the pandemic. We shall discuss these one by one, while emphasizing that these three approaches will be most effective if they can come together into a unified movement for the changes we need.

## Policy demands

- It is absolutely a high priority to end so-called "Intellectual Property Rights" that prevent governments and manufacturers in most of the world from producing vaccines against COVID-19 and medicines (both prophylactics like Evusheld and therapeutics for when people get sick like Paxlovid). This is essential for the health of people all over the world. It will also slow down the development of dangerous variants of the virus—which threaten people in the United States and elsewhere. Indeed, as we write this article, the BA/2 variant of Omicron may be sparking another massive wave of infection and death for the world.
- We need an OSHA regulation that requires vaccination. It should also include ventilation standards, testing, paid quarantine and isolation, as well as masking based on local disease incidence.
- Government paychecks and political support for working people who walk off the job due to health threats at work.
- More generally, we need ventilation rules for buildings and governmental certification to help institutions buy

effective systems, as it's currently very difficult to navigate for many smaller institutions. And funded assistance in planning and implementing effective installations. (Many COSH groups can provide assistance in finding relevant experts with workers' needs at heart)

- We need abundantly available and free rapid antigen tests. While supplies have increased since the peak of Omicron, these tests remain prohibitively expensive.
- We need to expand the Americans with Disabilities Act to account for infectious disease and within-household exposure. It should be easier to request accommodations and reasonable accommodations should also reflect take-home exposure. (For instance, if workers live with immunocompromised people).
- We need better social insurance policies for immunocompromised people whose living or work arrangements are no longer tenable in a world with endemic COVID-19, such as expanding Social Security Disability Insurance benefits that are made more accessible than under the current byzantine process.
- Full income support for those unable to work due to pandemic restrictions.
- Continued state and national moratoriums on evictions. Funding to provide legal and other support to those facing housing crises of all sorts.
- Safe and pleasant housing for the homeless.
- Creation and funding of well-ventilated child care centers.
- We need a federal corps of public health workers that could send antivirals to people's homes, help with vaccination and testing, provide convenient access to N95 masks, conduct contact tracing where this makes sense, etc.
- Global and national regulations to restrict economic development efforts or factory farming of animals that opens the way for the development of and interspecies transfer of viruses or bacteria that can cause new pandemics.
- Adequately funded efforts to prepare for the next pandemic, whether it be flu, another coronavirus, or transmitted in the polluted waters people may have to drink given climate change.

## Every day protection of oneself and others

Community, union, Left, harm reduction, and other people-based groups that distribute information about COVID-19 should extend their general pandemic education to include:

- Collective and individual protective behavior in workplaces. Under what conditions should workers, including teachers and hospital workers, simply go home to protect themselves or their families? Under what conditions should they and their co-workers walk off the job as a group? These are hard issues to discuss as a generality. It requires discussions among the workers themselves about the details, including the actual risks they are facing from the virus and the ways employers or others might act in retribution. But these issues need to be addressed. For teachers facing the unmasking fad that political officeholders have been engaged in at the request of the corporations (and of some parents), it is a critical issue. It has been a critical issue for warehouse workers, meatpackers, and others for two years now.
- Protecting kids and their families at schools: Similar information is needed by kids and their families. Under what conditions should the kids stay home because the schools are too dangerous? Under what conditions is this an individual decision, and when should it involve organized action by kids and/or parents?
- If necessary stores like groceries or pharmacies, or government offices like unemployment offices, allow maskless crowding, under what circumstances is this unsafe? What individual or collective actions are appropriate for customers/clients and for workers?
- The Left, particularly through groups like PCDC and VAX-Plus, can help provide the specific information that workers, kids, their families, and others will need to meet the pandemic threats they face when the powerful act in ways that endanger them. This requires detailed local understanding of the pandemic situation people are facing. PCDC and others can try to develop web-based tools to let local organizers and activists do this themselves, along with technical assistance when requested. The broader Left can take part in political struggles that these efforts provoke, and perhaps provide other forms of assistance.

## Direct struggles for needed changes

Neither employers nor governments will agree to do what is needed to protect our health on their own. They both exist so companies can make a profit off of our labors, and use biased news reporting, police, and firings to enforce their will. Early in the pandemic, they saw COVID-19 both as a major threat to the health and lives of the rich and also as a threat to the workers, police, soldiers, and other employees they need to keep the system running. But science has developed vaccines and treatments which they can afford and which they think will keep most workers alive and able to do the work they need—so at this point, they are “returning to normal” so “the economy won’t suffer.”

Unfortunately, at best, this means that older people (whose labors are not all that needed, and who receive Social Security and cost a lot on Medicare, all using funds they could otherwise invest) will continue to die; Black people, Indigenous Peoples, Latino/as and people who work in the more dangerous industries will develop Long COVID or die; and new variants will develop among the unvaccinated in the poorer and unvaccinated countries of the world.

So we have to conduct struggles that will be effective.

- Actively support direct action, including walkouts and strikes, by students, teachers, and families to keep schools safe. Students, teachers, and family members should keep close tabs on the state of the pandemic in their local - - Support hospital and nursing home workers’ demonstrations or strikes to protect their patients and themselves.
- If you work at a unionized workplace, pressure the union to take needed actions to protect yourself and others. This may include organizing for better contract language, and then waging campaigns to get unions to propose this language and to wage a serious battle for it. It also means working with others in your workgroup and beyond to walk off the job if conditions are too unsafe.
- If you work at a non-union workplace, work with your workgroup and beyond to push for safer conditions, including safety strikes if needed. This can also provide the organizing boost that can build a union.
- The policy demands are unlikely to be met without plenty of mass action. This may include mass protests to pressure local, state, or national officials. It may also require political strikes and road occupations to disrupt the operations of corporations and governments. Disruption often leads to concessions that can protect our health!
- We may have to occasionally confront right-wing demonstrations. Some of these will propose policies in language that seem to support health (like ending mask policies in school) but really endanger us all. When we do confront such demonstrations, it is important to have large numbers of working people take part who are diverse in race and ethnicity, age, and gender.

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Source [Tempest](#).

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