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Covid-19 pandemic and capitalism

# On COVID and the Plague of Capital

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**Suzi Weissman: Rob Wallace is an evolutionary epidemiologist with the Agroecology and Royal Economics Research Corps. His new book, *Dead Epidemiologists (2020)*, is on the origins of COVID-19. He authored *Big Farms Make Big Flu* and co-authored *Clear-Cutting Disease Control: Capital-Led Deforestation, Public Health Austerity, and Vector-Borne Infection*.**

**We are also joined by Graham Christensen in northeastern Nebraska, where he is a fifth-generation family farmer. He is president and founder of G.S. Resolve. Our third guest is Meleiza Figueroa, the producer-director extraordinaire of our program, and she is also a PhD candidate in urban geography. All three are involved with *Pandemic for the People*.**

**Rob, we begin with you. In your *Monthly Review* article called “[COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital](#),” you are talking about the systemic roots of COVID-19 and how it is situated within the context of the globalized capitalist economy.**

Industrial agriculture, habitat destruction, global commodity chains and the travel network have set up this perfect storm of conditions, not just for COVID, but also for future pandemics.

How can we get a wider systemic perspective on the current crisis? How vulnerable will we continue to be when we hopefully vanquish COVID-19?

**Rob Wallace:** Every outbreak that comes out just about annually, whether it's Zika or Ebola or some of the influenzas, tends to have us scramble to figure out what's going on. How is it spread, what is its clinical course? That is important because we need to know what they are doing; we need as a society to be able to respond.

Emergencies do happen, and we are obligated to intervene and make sure that any one outbreak doesn't spread so far as to kill so many people because of the capacities of these pathogens to do so. But in focusing on a particular virus or pathogen, we lose sight of the context in which many of these strains are spilling over and evolving across the rural-urban continuum.

The COVID-19 virus and these other pathogens are emerging out what we call a circuit of production. Some are at the point of contact in which industrial agriculture is cutting into the forest, increasing the interface between wildlife that is the pathogens' natural reservoir and spilling over into local livestock or laborers.

Despite how very different these viruses and pathogens are from each other in terms of their virology and subsequent development, all are emerging out of this expanding circle of production beginning in the forests and expanding around the world.

**SW: You've made the connection between this emerging novel coronavirus and the globalized industrialized agriculture system, especially factory farming of livestock. Trump has made meatpacking an “essential” industry, which has increased the danger these workers are facing during the pandemic. Perhaps this is true for consumers as well. As we are facing economic catastrophe, how can we make substantial reforms to our food system, helping us weather the crisis and preventing future pandemics?**

**RW:** Our group Pandemic Research for the People, in which Graham and Meleiza participate, are putting out a call for action around exactly this topic. There are two levels: at the level of the farm, and at the level of the consumer.

Much industrial production produces essentially very genetically similar livestock, hog, poultry and game by the thousands. You might have a turkey barn with 15,000 turkeys that are pretty much genetically the same. If pathogens arrive, they don't really have to do much work to burn right through the whole group. There's no immunological firebreaks built into the system.

If you're a dangerous pathogen, you can get away with killing your host fast and the next host is right there. If you have 15,000 hosts with a similar genetic makeup, it pretty much selects the most virulent pathogens imaginable.

To protect your crop, you have to abandon the business model on which much industrial agriculture is being produced. You need to go back to treating agriculture as a natural economy.

You would reintroduce diversity of breeds into the rural landscape and in essence, reintroduce firebreaks. If some livestock survive an outbreak, those who have the genetic quirk that allows them to survive a pathogen would, in essence, act as the progenitors of the next generation.

Farmers around the world know this. But we've moved away from that knowledge by attempting to turn animals into widgets. And by turning farming into an industrial system, we have built a road that pathogens can travel.

## Agribusiness vs. Public Health

**SW:** You talked about how agribusiness is at war with public health and that the public health system is losing. So maybe you could just talk a little bit about the politics at work. It seems that agribusiness, much like other industrial sectors, has considerable political power, but its ability to dominate stems less from the efficiencies they introduce and more their control of market access.

**RW:** That means basically buying up politicians and state capitals around the country and around the world, and locking out alternatives that we very much need.

We can do agriculture so we don't actually produce all this pollution, we don't produce these pathogens, we don't force the meatpackers back into the factory during a pandemic. When we start to treat agriculture as a part and parcel of communities, both rural and urban, then we can get back on our feet.

This is very much a political problem. It's not merely the logistics of agriculture – it requires that we understand the process of food production and why we have chosen this method. We all need to understand that what happens in one part of the globe very much impacts elsewhere.

**SW:** Graham Christensen is a fifth-generation family northeastern Nebraska farmer. He is also the president and founder of G.S. Resolve. So what are those connections, Graham?

**GC:** We have a fragile food system. I serve as a kind of messenger, being 40 years old and having witnessed firsthand a complete 180-degree shift from when I was a young person in the way food is being produced in our area.

What you've seen here is just a dismantling of regulations that were in place to check agribusiness from getting rampantly out of control, heavily concentrated and dominating the market, which has now become completely uncompetitive.

COVID-19 brought out a clear picture of where the disparities lie. In Nebraska, we have had a whole set of legislation that has further weakened our ability to make better decisions for ourselves. And that is combined with big-time federal policy issues like NAFTA, the neglect of antitrust enforcement and the debasement of country of origin labeling.

Consumers don't have access to transparency to decide where they want to get their food. It makes it tricky to support farmers that are doing things ethically in Nebraska right now.

With COVID, you've seen the meatpacking plants become hot spots for the transmittal of the virus. The University of Nebraska Medical Center recently showed us how this is impacting people from more diverse backgrounds. It's primarily impacting Hispanic workers and some of the communities that are newer to our area. This has revealed the disparities.

Over the past five to ten years everybody in Nebraska connected around the food issue is in unison around the demand for food sovereignty. This creates an opportunity for unification – whether it's tribal lands, the inner city of north or south Omaha or in farmland USA — so that we can work together to come up with solutions that will create a superior system from what we have now.

Look, \$13 an hour are the wages that Costco tried to implement in Fremont, on the poultry production line for the largest poultry operation west of the Missouri River. We did get it raised to \$15 an hour after quite some debate, but put this in context. When I was born in 1979 in the same town, on the processing line, except for Hormel, those wages then were thirteen dollars an hour.

This is also the sixth year in a row that the average independent farmer has been in the red. This system of production is not working. People are hurting. When people are hurting and people's health is declining, then something is wrong.

It's the consumers who will ultimately drive the market. They're going to dictate the policy, so we've assembled about 80 different groups of folks and entities from different backgrounds so that we can come together with a more unified message.

We want to paint a picture and then show the solutions on how we get in front of this issue. Those solutions are regenerative agriculture and using more biodiverse applications, as Rob was describing. With a more local and regional food security focus we can have that transparency from consumer to the farmer, as it was at one time.

## Six Steps Toward Solutions

We have identified six initial actions to help move us forward.

Number one, we need to take care of the people working in the meatpacking plants. These people are unfairly being put into situations without proper protective equipment, sometimes being asked to even purchase the equipment

themselves, even though they're on low-income wages.

We're asking for increased worker protections, with pay and safety standards as the priority. We have to be able to restore human rights within the meatpacking industry.

Second, we need antitrust legislation to be enforced and updated so that we can restore the competitive mechanism in agriculture that can help independent farmers.

Number three, we need state inspection of meat processing. The USDA put a stranglehold against enabling small farmers to produce high-quality foods that can be funneled into our local area or regional trading. As we've seen with what's happened in the centralized meatpacking plants there is a real food security risk.

Four, we need to create a pathway to ownership for young and diverse people. If companies own the majority of land, it is probably game over for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and family farming as we know it. And that means that nutritional issues and health issues arising from lack of nutrition will increase.

As the baby boomer generation holds most of the farmland, the turnover in land over the next 15 years is crucial. Young people need a pathway to owning farmland so that they can be part of the solution.

Fifth, there needs to be a state-level ban on corporate farming in order to allow more independent operations to thrive.

Six, we need to implement strategic grain reserves. If the COVID-19 virus resurges or the next pandemic hits, we need to have an adequate food supply both for people and animals. This also creates another market for farmers that helps keep them afloat.

**SW** I grew up in Montana, where of course those silos of grain reserves were everywhere. To underscore the connection between agriculture and capitalism, we see the rise of the pandemic and how rapidly it spread throughout the world. No corner is untouched but here in the United States, it's raging far more than should be the case because of the lack of leadership.

**RW:** It was accepted across both political parties that meatpacking plants needed to reopen. The governors across the Midwest, whether Democrat and Republican, rubber-stamped that decision because large agricultural concerns are the economic engine for many states. Governors were willing to cut off unemployment insurance as a way of forcing workers back into the plants.

Some basic questions were moved off the table in a way that requires everyday people to step up and intervene. What are our priorities? What do we need?

There is a sense that the political class has abandoned us. This requires everyday people to step up and push back and make sure that its demands are met. Just in terms of vaccines and antivirals, there is a long history of progressive demands that the latest in medical innovations be made available.

In Pandemic Research for the People (PREP) we've outline six different working groups. The first is rural, two of them have already been launched and we're on our way. The other ones we launched are prep neighborhoods to deal with some of the outbreaks occurring in urban areas.

Criminal Negligence and Mutual Aid

**SW: Meleiza Figueroa, Rob talked about meatpackers being forced back to work. We've heard over and over again that we should sacrifice ourselves for the economy instead of having the economy serve the community. Could you comment on other ways in which the leadership has been not just absent, but has made things worse?**

**MF:** Absolutely, I would probably use the term "criminally negligent." Globalization has really set us up for this perfect storm. This is true not just in the food system, but in many other essential goods and services.

What this pandemic is really bringing home is the social vulnerability we have from having dismantled a lot of local systems of support in favor of monopoly-owned capital. Four to six companies own almost 90% of the food chain. Local governments have been retooled to be value producers for real estate instead of guardians and protectors of the public interest.

I'm part of PREP Neighborhoods Working Group. Our objective is to consolidate and systematize knowledge from the ad hoc efforts of communities all over the country.

We're not reinventing the wheel from scratch. Communities of color and poor communities have survived through mutual aid, especially in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Mutual aid and disaster relief was an organizational response that came out of Katrina as well as Occupy Sandy.

Over many natural disasters, communities have developed a loose model where network of neighborhoods have organized for our own survival. This is in contrast to the government model of waiting for the government to organize a rescue, which is not going to happen, certainly not on the scale and timeline required.

So we've been talking about how we can help to amplify these efforts and make them available to community organizers who have been geared towards more pressure-type politics. What are government responses that could help us build the structures that we need to maintain ourselves and fight for more of what we actually need?

Demands come out of movements, so our first dispatch highlighted Southern Solidarity, which was based in New Orleans' Black community. This form of organizing is solidarity, not charity.

Let's build a model of what's necessary for our basic needs and make a political impact beginning at the local level. Local governments still have a lot of power, which has largely been relinquished in the last 40 years. So it's a matter of training city council people how to govern, to be accountable to public needs.

In the first wave of the pandemic people were making grocery deliveries and prescription pickups. How can we go beyond that? How can we create new structures, working with local producers and also engaging local governments to addressing these issues?

Mutual aid for me gives a lot of hope because it is in many ways a moment for the knitting together of interconnected problems that have just been forced into plain view by this pandemic.

In my town in Chico, California we started a people's assembly as a result of the George Floyd protests to defund the police. We started asking questions: If we're going to defund the police, where should we put these public resources?

Almost immediately, a majority of people we've been talking to say we need to grow food again. These responses

are coming from the vulnerabilities we're experiencing because of the pandemic. Same thing with labor — with teachers being forced to go back to schools.

In this way the pandemic is bringing those networks back together for, dare I say it, some kind of dual power type of a structure. Again, that's aspirational, but mutual aid is the core. And I hope that this perfect storm will lead to a solution.

## Capitalism: Solution or Problem?

**SW:** You have been dancing around the obvious point of how capitalism has made all of this much worse. The conventional wisdom is that capitalism frees up human creativity — that's how we get scientific and other innovation because people aren't hobbled by structures. Yet each of you has been talking about how gutted these structures are, given the profit motive.

**One of the stories this week is how in Los Angeles a factory producing masks had to be shut down. Many of its employees tested positive for the virus. Throughout this pandemic something so basic as just producing and distributing protective equipment is unable to be done. Hospital workers were wearing trash bags.**

**We have the most expensive health care system in the world yet there's not enough beds. How many of the solutions to the problem have been handcuffed by capitalism?**

**RW:** I certainly have my personal stance about capitalism, but around the world you've had a variety of countries that have been able to respond to this in a way that the United States and Europe, for the most part, have not. I think profit can get in the way of delivering on many of the services that are necessary to keep society running.

In terms of how the outbreak was handled, different countries were able to respond because they see governance as something helping the people with which you rule or rule with or rule over however you want to put it. The notion that governance is supposed to help people in their time of need is a really weird, wild concept here in the United States.

Capitalism has much to do with it, but particularly in the United States example, we're turning capital back into money. That's a way of saying that the Apple class is cashing out and that they can only see public services as the means of their getting rich. This is a different cycle of accumulation than that during World War II.

China is a case where they built a public health system as a means of being able to project imperial might. And what's remarkable is that in the matter of months in the United States we seemed to signal not only the world, but to people here, that we are no longer in the business of maintaining that infrastructure.

We see our country where the political class is almost on strike against the notion of running a government for our people, even if the objective is to accumulate profit. This is where efforts are required that Meleiza described of mutual aid.

There's also a long history of progressive forces organizing in the neighborhoods as well as in the factories. And in fact, these two things are tied together. If a factory went on strike, it's important that the neighborhood support it. Chambers of Commerce emerged in part because they were very much disturbed by the chambers of labor that came out in their neighborhoods in support of workers and their strikes.

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There were decades of organizing in rural areas to push back against what was, in essence, East Coast-backed agribusiness. They wanted to preserve the rights of rural communities to defend their town economies from being gutted.

So in order to find our solutions, they have to be embedded in more local, regional-based ways of actually exercising political power. That doesn't mean that we don't keep track about what's going on elsewhere – in fact it is how we learn. When we speak about local and regional, we're not closing ourselves off from learning and working with people elsewhere.

Already we've learned a lot across neighborhoods and rural areas together. In fact it speaks to what could be a future politics going forward and healing the gap that the political class has taken advantage of, in dividing the rural from urban — both Republicans and Democrats have made a lot of political hay out of that — and it must come down to everyday people reaching across and organizing in such a way that ends this division.

*This interview is excerpted and edited from the Suzi Weissman's Jacobin Radio program on KPFK in Los Angeles. [Against the Current](#).*

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