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Covid-19 pandemic

# A convergence of crises, dominated by the covid-19 pandemic

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## Introduction

The year 2020 thus far has seen the convergence of major crises, the most marking being the covid-19 pandemic which, having seemed to reach a peak in the second trimester, is now once again reaching unprecedented levels of infection. This has combined with the extreme effects of the climatic crisis - wildfires in California and Brazil, widespread flooding in Asia; the reinforced neoliberal offensive as capitalist governments try to recoup the losses of the lockdown period; re-emergence of localized conflicts such as in the eastern Mediterranean against a background of a continuing struggle for geopolitical hegemony. At the same time the uncertainty of the outcome of the US presidential election is a factor in the international situation. It is too early to say what the world will look like at the end of 2020 and how far it will have profoundly changed.

The combined effects of these crises continue to reveal the ways in which the poor working people and among them particularly women, Blacks and ethnic minorities, rural populations, suffer from all these crises. Loss of life, jobs and livelihoods, education, homes combine to create an increasingly impoverished and dispossessed layer worldwide. Struggles and movements have developed challenging authoritarian governments careless of their populations' health, contesting the unsafe conditions of "return to work" policies whose goal is to benefit the capitalist economy; highlighting the particular place of women and ethnic minorities among essential workers. These erupted in a dramatic fashion with the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA contesting both racism and police violence, which rapidly spread around the world not just as solidarity movement but also challenging local manifestations of racism and police violence.

## A continuing pandemic

At the beginning of June, five months after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it had already caused more than 400 thousand deaths worldwide, with more than 6.8 million officially registered cases in 216 countries - and more than 3 billion people had been confined to their homes around April.

As the pandemic then began to recede in Europe, after having receded in China and the Far East at the beginning of the spring - but remained particularly acute in North and South America - the question was raised as to the extent to which there would be a second, galloping wave of infection, or whether the virus would mutate into a more benign form - the uncertainties remained marked.

In mid-October 2020 the total number of deaths worldwide was reaching 1.2 million, and confirmed cases over 40 million. The USA, India and Brazil continue to top the lists of deaths and infections, but the rate of infection is rising everywhere, particularly sharply in Europe where the United Kingdom has registered more than 43 thousand deaths and France and the Spanish state over 33 thousand each.

In many countries, the numbers of people infected, ill or dead are notoriously underestimated, firstly because of the

political desire of certain leaders to deny the seriousness of the situation, and also because of the lack of means to test, hospitalize and centralize the count of Covid-19 cases.

Faced with the health disaster of globalized neo-liberalism, many governments, under pressure from the medical profession and public opinion, tried to regain control by taking strong measures. The result was a clear lull in the epidemic - in early spring in China and the Far East, in late spring in Europe and New England - which led to more or less extensive easing of lockdown, with the maintenance of barrier measures, in societies traumatized by the violence of the disease and the governmental measures taken. In most countries of North and South America, India and other countries in Asia and Africa, the pandemic continued to develop slowly, with very uneven protective measures. Some countries such as Argentina or the Philippines have experienced uninterrupted lockdown since March!

With the arrival of autumn in the northern hemisphere, a major second wave of infection is taking shape in Europe and the Middle East with new restrictions, from increased quarantine periods for travellers, to reimposition of strongly repressive lockdown and curfew measures - often regionally differentiated - in a number of countries in Europe.

## Economic crisis

The consequences of the slowdown of the economy caused directly and indirectly by measures to contain the population, with no or completely inadequate financial recompense, against the backdrop of a financial crisis that had already been brewing for a long time, are beginning to be better understood: a drop in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 10% on average in OECD countries (Europe, North America, Japan, South Korea, Australia...) in the second quarter of 2020 (for comparison, it was -2.3% in 2009 during the previous financial crisis); a drop of 25% in India, 20% in Great Britain, 17% in Mexico, 14% in France, 9.5% in the USA, 7.8% in Japan. The drop in production was already 2 to 3% in the first quarter. However, the Chinese leaders proclaim that the recovery has already taken place in China in the 2nd quarter: +3.2% (compared to -7% in the first quarter). In any case, current projections estimate that world GDP will fall by around 6% in 2020 on the current basis, and will not return to its pre-crisis level before 2023 - without anticipating a further possible worsening of the pandemic situation.

There were tens of millions of unemployed in China in March, up to 22 million unemployed in the US in April 2020 - and while it was announced these figures would fall sharply in the following months, it appears that the jobs being recreated are much more precarious and part-time than before the crisis - and in the US the number of people currently in employment is estimated to be 11.5 million fewer than in February. In the European Union, the number of unemployed has risen to 7.8%, with huge disparities between the north and the south!

A new debt trap is closing in on a growing number of countries in the South whose structural difficulties are worsening with the Covid-19 crisis: a reduction in foreign exchange reserves, a sharp deterioration in trade terms with the fall in the price of raw materials accompanied by a depreciation of the currencies of these countries against the US dollar. Nineteen countries in the South have already suspended payments and 28 countries at high risk of over-indebtedness. The G20 countries, the IMF and the World Bank are unflinchingly supporting creditors and are further aggravating the indebtedness of the countries of the South with emergency financing mainly in the form of loans while reinforcing the application of neoliberal austerity policies. Repayments will be higher in the coming years and will weigh increasingly heavily on workers and the working classes. The Fourth International supports the different mobilizations of movements fighting at the international level for the abolition of illegitimate debts.

## Damage from the offensive of the bourgeoisies and

## their governments

For capitalists and their governments, it is necessary to return to work and consume whatever it costs in terms of health and public finances, but on the other hand they seek to limit in a more or less extreme way other freedoms in the name of the fight against the pandemic: to move, to meet, to entertain ourselves in ways that avoid the expense of a proper test trace isolate and support system.

- **Massive aid plans for companies** (often independently of their actual crisis) are enacted, including short-time working, and tax cuts on production that are sustainable, from China to the USA and the various European countries.

At its level, the European Union has proclaimed a European recovery plan of Euros750 billion over 3 years, a little more than half of which is in the form of mutualised debt - with a counterpart of control over national policies over the next few years (this is partly a propaganda effect as it represents in fact 1% public spending).

- **Public services are under ever-increasing pressure**; we are not seeing massive reinvestment in public health, education care for the elderly and children and support for disabled people or other sectors that the health crisis has put in very great difficulty! Indeed, we are also seeing the further penetration of private capital into sectors which at least in Europe have been run as part of the public sector.

- **Increasingly authoritarian policies** are being implemented on this occasion. After the fight against terrorism, it is the fight against the pandemic that is used to justify liberticidal measures: police everywhere; prohibitive fines for those who do not respect quarantines or compulsory masks - after blowing hot and cold on their effectiveness; lockdowns and curfews that forbid social life.

These policies are asserted alongside stigmatization of the youth and popular strata, particularly racialized people - whether of long-established communities or more recent migrant origin - held up as thoughtless and irresponsible, as if they do not want to protect themselves.

- **Labour law is being shaken up everywhere**, the flexibility initially imposed in the name of an exceptional economic situation is being perpetuated, and company closures are being made easier;

- **Trade union, association and demonstration rights have been strangled** during lockdown and remain limited, often subject to rules close to a state of emergency;

- At the same time, we are seeing a **crackdown against migrants**, notably on the USA southern border or across the Mediterranean.

But the convulsions of this multidimensional crisis also contribute to an **exacerbated competition between great powers and between countries**: between the USA and China - between the USA of Trump and the rest of the world, starting with Iran; with Putin's Russia; between Erdogan's Turkey and its neighbours, for example the dispute with Greece which is becoming heated, with European powers such as Macron's France fanning the flames of conflict. The corrupt Azerbaijan regime, losing the financial means to maintain its despotism, launched an offensive against the Armenians in Karabakh with the support of the Turkish Air Force and Syrian mercenaries. It is trying to gain popular legitimacy and postpone any possibility of a democratic process.

Finally, with regard to the **environmental crisis**, although the fall in world production in the spring may have had a brief positive effect on the level of pollution and the climate greenhouse effect, there is still a strong tendency for

environmental damage to increase: the giant fires of 2020 in Australia, Brazil and throughout the Amazon region, the USA are the result of increasing droughts caused by climate change, and by neo-liberal land management and sometimes directly pyromaniac farming systems.

## Health and social effects

Concerning coronavirus screening policies and the type of tests, protection policies (masks, access restrictions, quarantines...), hospital care and equipment, vaccine research: there is an avalanche of competition and liberal mismanagement, bureaucratic inefficiency, with risks of new traumatic lockdowns and new hospital crises out of control while health personnel are exhausted and often particularly affected by the coronavirus.

We have thus seen rich countries (starting with the USA) avoid being much less effective in fighting the epidemic than some countries considered poor (Vietnam, Cuba...) but with a tradition of community health care.

We have also seen the strong social, racial, age and gender inequalities in the face of the pandemic! Base employees in the health, cleaning and transport sectors, often highly feminized and racialized; precarious and informal workers who cannot afford the luxury of stopping their work, often very exposed to illness but losing most of their income; the working classes, often racialized, suffering the consequences of overcrowded living conditions and junk food; migrants and workers abroad; peasants and indigenous people from the countries of the South; vulnerable people over 65 years of age and more generally people suffering from chronic diseases: even if public figures, artists and political leaders have also been struck by the Covid19, the heaviest tribute has undoubtedly been paid by those who are victims of poverty and multiple oppression!

Women in particular, have concentrated the risks and suffering in the burden of their professional and family tasks and in the macho violence that the pandemic and lockdowns have generated or amplified.

In the face of the social disasters rapidly brought about by the shutdowns and lockdowns, many - but not all - governments temporarily broke with the dogma of budgetary austerity, and distributed basic social allowances: again, from China to the USA including various European countries. These allowances of a few hundred euros, paid in a single payment or monthly, have served as a minimal social shock absorber, and have even helped to make some of the popular sectors a little more sympathetic to political leaders, as happened with Bolsonaro in Brazil.

However, these policies of new social safety nets are conjunctural and clearly do not correspond to a neo-Keynesian turning point for significant sectors of the bourgeoisie. The explosion of public debt will have long-lasting and serious consequences, as it will serve as a pretext for deepening structural counter-reforms aimed at labour contracts, trade union rights and social security systems. The governments are repaying public debt on the nail and are preparing to present the neo-liberal bill (especially in what remains of public services) by reaffirming the discourse of competitiveness. Nowhere do governments use the high incomes and high fortunes that have in fact strengthened their assets. Nowhere are pharmaceutical companies being nationalized in a time of great need.

The effects of digital poverty have been intensified during the pandemic:

- ▶ access to online teaching - fights of teachers at all levels for online teaching to reduce the risks of face to face teaching in educational establishment not adapted to physical distancing and respect of barrier measures have won some victories; they have to be accompanied by the fight for the students regarding access to internet, devices and workspaces;
- ▶ access to government and local authority services are increasingly internet only;
- ▶ internet shopping has increased massively leaving those who do not have the necessary tools to access it

(internet, credit card) in difficulty and increasing the exploitation of those who work in distribution (Amazon for example, or the postal service).

## The result on the political level and in terms of struggles

The legitimacy of the political powers and the dominant logic of profit is increasingly eroded in this general context, it has been seen to have failed to cope with such a catastrophe. The workers, especially the workers "from below" and "on the front line", have been symbolically revalued... But with the combined fears of disease, unemployment and repression, the path of struggle is, for many, very difficult at the moment! Resistance has not managed to grow in numbers and to follow on from the glimmers of hope in June.

In many countries (if not most) the major trade unions have been completely submerged in the pandemic crisis. Not only have they become even more reticent and avoiding any major conflict, they often do not even have anything to say about the crisis policy of the ruling classes. Nevertheless, they still play an important role in the daily defensive struggles of the working class. Therefore, in the future it will be important in many countries - even more so than in the past - to engage in a class-struggle policy in the trade unions and to generalize the limited initiatives that are taken by unions or currents with a more combative approach.

Many of the bubbling or latent socio-political movements of before the pandemic have been stifled by the intensification of repression in Hong Kong, Algeria and Egypt. Social and democratic movements have also been suspended under the epidemic in Chile, Iraq, France, Catalonia... Are rapid resurgences possible in these countries?

It would be necessary to analyse in greater detail what has become of the bottom-up structures based on popular solidarity built up during the pandemic, which could be developed in several countries.

Fortunately, several mass movements have been asserting themselves since the end of the spring, on different bases but with a common background of struggle for democracy and against the competitive functioning of society:

- **The movement against racism and police violence**, which started in the USA, is still very strong - in Europe, also in solidarity with migrants on a more limited but essential basis (such as the recent demonstrations in Germany);
- **The resurgence of the revolt in Lebanon** against the corruption of the confessional regime, starting with the explosion of the port of Beirut;
- **The uprising in Mali**;
- **The uprising in Belarus** against Lukashenko's rule and his constantly rigged elections;
- **The uprising of Thai youth** against discredited royalty;
- The electoral victory in the first round of the MAS in **Bolivia as a result of mass mobilization**;
- **The popular revolt in Chile** has forced a 25 October referendum on the constitution of the Pinochet dictatorship -

rejection would be a significant victory.

It remains to be seen what new rise can take place, integrating the lessons of the pandemic, for movements against climate change and massive pollution, and more generally for ecological struggles. What resurgence for the feminist movements that have asserted themselves at the forefront of struggles in recent years?

The potential for struggles and uprisings is still there against a dominant order which, confronted with a crisis of profit and growing delegitimization, is seeking to strengthen itself by a generalized authoritarianism but with certain leaders who are sometimes very adventurist even from the point of view of the bourgeoisie. But this potential has had difficulty expressing itself so far with the fear of the pandemic and the confusion of measures to roll it back. It has not been possible so far to change the balance of power and make an alternative to capitalism more credible.

In this situation, the most reactionary and autocratic, conspiracy and racist ideologies assert themselves on their extreme right, structure themselves and, in order to attack the oppressed and exploited in struggle, find relays or even conductors with political leaders who gain or hold on to power like Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro, Xi Yiping, Modi, Duterte, Rohani, Nethanyahu, Erdogan, Orban, Kaczinsky... while the more "presentable" leaders can only encourage them by carrying out themselves attacks against democratic principles, often unprecedented in their country for decades.

The 3 November elections in the USA will be a decisive event: if they lead to a (probably illegitimate) re-election of Trump, they could make the situation even more tense, with a polarization in which the extreme right would gain an advantage and the risks of mass revolt would grow. On the other hand, if Trump were to be ousted, an important link in the chain of the far right and authoritarian governments would be removed and, without having any illusions in what Biden represents or intends, this would represent a breath of fresh air for exploited and oppressed people in struggle worldwide.

## Conclusion

The labour movement, the social movements, (and we ourselves) are disarmed, torn between the need to take care of health, to protect ourselves from the pandemic on the one hand, and on the other hand opposition to freedom-restricting measures imposed by governments that have destroyed social protection and public health systems.

Revolutionaries and anticapitalist activists face big tasks! We must help forge and strengthen united fronts of the exploited and oppressed against authoritarian governments and ultra-liberal programmes.

In the emergency situation we are experiencing, it is essential everywhere to reinvest massively in public services with free access, starting with the health systems, and massively relaunching social assistance and housing programmes financed by taxing the rich, profits and blocking dividends. It is necessary to socialize the pharmaceutical and other general interest industries such as energy, the banking system and water distribution. Production systems should be reconverted to satisfy immense social needs rather than the deadly industries of armament, polluting chemicals, luxury goods, etc. Agriculture must be reoriented towards sustainable systems of soil cultivation and natural resources. Discriminatory policies must be stopped, borders opened to protect endangered populations and pooling human exchanges rather than placing them in competition and provoking wars!

We must give a central place to the self-organization of the population and health and care workers. The most

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effective measures to fight the pandemic are those that will be best accepted because they will be defined by the people themselves with the health and care workers. It is a question of regaining power over our lives.

On this path, in the struggles, in the resistance against destructive capitalism, for democracy and for an alternative and sustainable economic policy, lies the possibility to change the national power relations that are unfavourable today, and to make more concrete an ecosocialist alternative for humanity.

*19 October 2020*

*PS:*

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