

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6465>



Covid-19 statement

Statement by Socialist Resurgence on Covid-19

- Features - Covid-19 - Statements -

Publication date: Wednesday 25 March 2020

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

The rise of the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, brought the global economy to a crashing halt. Virtually all of the contradictions of capitalism, some previously hidden behind an economic boom, are brought into stark relief amidst lockdowns, panic, and emergency measures.

As of March 24, confirmed cases of coronavirus have skyrocketed to over 410,000 around the world. The largest case number is still in China, but whereas the increase in Chinese cases has slowed to the double digits, that of the United States reported more than 13,000 new cases on March 23 alone. The death toll in Italy has surpassed that of China, and already the rest of Europe is beginning to mirror the Italian situation. Germany, France, and the Spanish state are all right behind Italy in new daily confirmed cases, well over 3500 each and rising. The next country to approach these titans of commerce is Iran, with slightly over 1000 new cases each day at the time of writing.

Economic roots of coronavirus catastrophe

Capitalism is a system in which the whole body of social production is controlled on the one hand by a vanishingly small class of parasites, and on the other, broken up into an endless number of mutually competing companies, trusts, and states. Each of these actors is constantly doing everything in its power to have a higher rate of profit or return on investment than the others. The result of the fundamental workings of this system based on the class exploitation of workers by capitalists has had multiple effects that worsen the COVID crisis.

Pioneer evolutionary biologist Rob Wallace and Marxist author Mike Davis have both shown that the conditions for modern worldwide pandemic, whether coronavirus or flu, are greatly amplified by the fundamental processes of capitalism. Due to its drive to exploit nature to the fullest and maximize all of its investments, capital has destroyed a sizable portion of the world's forests, either by clearing space for agribusiness and livestock rearing or to utilize natural resources to their total depletion. Often these occur at the same time, meaning that livestock, whose living conditions mirror that of the assembly line, are in closer and closer proximity to previously unheard of strains of animal diseases manifesting in what was previously deep in the forest. These factors, deforestation and high-density factory farms, create the conditions under which global pandemics are almost a certainty. They also happen to be drivers for the massive wildfires that the world has seen in the last decade.

Competition drives capital deeper and deeper into land that was previously geographically distant from the worldwide circuits of trade. This causes the outbreak of diseases like novel coronavirus and connects them to the world economy. Since the stock market depends on expectation of both short and long-term profitability, individual capitalists and capital as a whole purposefully blind themselves to anything that could cause a major slow-down in profits. That latter fact is the reason the response from virtually all governments has been slow and ineffective. Whereas the world outside China had several months to prepare for the spread of the disease, the dangers were downplayed in order to avoid the suggestion that production and commerce might have to be curtailed, thus precipitating a panic among investors in the stock market.

Slowing down the initial spread of COVID would have meant paying for massive testing campaigns in every country as soon as the virus was identified in China. In itself, this act would have meant large payments for doctors and equipment, not to mention the inevitable slowdowns in production as workers test positive and choose to self-quarantine. A rational response to the virus means workers and their dependents must not engage in productive activity while also being sustained in all of the necessities of life.

In normal conditions, capital begrudgingly pays workers a wage in exchange for a greater amount of labor than they pay for, which is realized as profit. In conditions that are either to prepare for a pandemic or in the midst of one, workers, and the whole of society, need to be supported without capitalists exploiting their labor. Instead, we have seen continuous lies, inaction, and hesitation in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Even today, the countries that are being hit the hardest especially the United States, Italy, the Spanish state, France, and Germany are all keeping the factories and retail up and running while barring workers freedom of movement in public life.

Every demand that has a hope of creating a humane response to this pandemic directly contradicts the fundamental relationships at the center of capitalism. Food and basic necessities need to be distributed freely and on a door-to-door basis. Housing, utilities, and health care need to be funded out of the collective surplus produced by humanity rather than on an individual basis. These realities directly pose questions such as: What is the purpose of the landlord? Why are the banks in the service of the owners and not the great masses of working people? What class should be in control of directing the state?

The technical means of mitigating the crisis exist, but they are not profitable. All economies could be put on a war footing to produce new hospitals, medical supplies, and even use the opportunity to begin a massive build-out of green infrastructure. Workers made unemployed must have all their needs met. Workers still on the job need hazard pay, safety equipment, and guarantees for their families. Instead, the first discussions for bailout are oil and gas production and airlines. Automobile and weapons factories are still running, with thousands of workers in close proximity on assembly lines.

Capital responds by strengthening the nation-state

Despite the international nature of the crisis, a major response from all capitalist countries so far has been to invoke foreign travel bans. In a context that has seen Brexit and rising nationalism throughout Europe, not to mention the "Build the Wall" mantra of Trump and anti-Muslim pogroms in India, border closures are not so much a workable response to fight the virus as a method to target immigrants and national minorities. Virtually all scientific studies agree that border control and travel bans are incapable of stopping the spread of the virus. If anything, nationalist travel bans are slowing down coordinated international aid efforts.

Along with shutting down borders, COVID has also brought with it a frontal attack against immigrants and refugees. Since March 1, Greece has closed all land and sea entry from adjacent countries and is fostering both state and vigilante attacks against migrants. The incidences are getting quite extreme, with reports of beatings and live ammunition being used to attack asylum seekers. Detention camps are limiting their hours, supposedly to stop the spread of the virus but really increasing the likelihood of severe clusters appearing in migrant camps whose residents have no freedom of movement.

In the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has continued raiding houses and detaining undocumented people. The government has said that it will even continue the practice of ICE entering into hospitals, although it will "try to avoid" doing so. Similarly, the Spanish state maintains its detention centers and keeps aid, unemployment, and other basic necessities out of the hands of undocumented workers. Every European country is maintaining these xenophobic practices that not only further penalize migrant workers but also threaten the health of the entire global community by denying millions of people access to medical infrastructure and treatment.

The Israeli occupation of Palestine continues through this crisis, and decades of bombing hospitals threaten to create a new explosion in the "largest open air prison" that is Gaza. The occupation has always targeted Palestinians' ability to give and receive medical aid, and this pandemic is a ticking time bomb if that access continues to be denied.

Similarly, the system of checkpoints in the West Bank and the lesser-status of "Israeli" Arabs means that Palestinians, and likely non-white Jews, who are seeking medical service will be deprioritized.

Amidst its death throes as the single great power in the world, the United States has made its mark on the world through its terroristic use of sanctions. The U.S. government and its partners in Europe are actively keeping medical and other humanitarian supplies from Iran and Venezuela. The deaths in the former are piling up because of U.S. imperialism's desire for global geopolitical dominance. Instead of using their incredibly high levels of productivity to coordinate an international effort to make sure there are sufficient hospital beds and equipment everywhere in the world, the choice of the so-called "developed" countries is to crank up the death and suffering.

Whereas the capitalist countries are using COVID-19 as an excuse to strengthen nationalist postures, Cuba shows that an international crisis requires an internationalist solution. Cuba has responded not by shutting itself off from the world but by taking in a cruise ship for treatment and sending doctors to help other countries fight coronavirus. The Cubans realize that even with their relatively limited resources, solidarity is the key to winning the battle against this pandemic. Every country can follow the Cuban example by not shutting down its borders but exporting the maximum amount of aid. If coordinated on a global scale, this would also allow different countries to focus on producing specific implements and therefore allow benefits of scale and specialization take effect.

Capitalism in decay

Some 175 years ago, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed out that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." In the epoch of capitalism in decay, this means that despite dazzling heights of scientific achievement, even basic science is ignored and marginalized. Concretely, governments have been defunding institutions of research, meaning that disease prevention is in the hands of big capital and finance. The total unpreparedness, and even unreality, being shown by capitalist governments is a reflection of this fact.

In the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson took the position of fostering "herd immunity" until quite recently. Johnson's vision of infecting a majority of the population right now, so that the virus' peak would pass and business could restart at a normal level sooner, is shared by a whole section of capital. The "herd immunity" plan of action would lead to multitudes of more deaths than necessary and overburden the British National Health Service in an almost unfathomable way.

Capital justifies this view by arguing that only the weak will die. We see that people deemed unprofitable such as pensioners and disabled people are worthy of death in its eyes. A complete humanitarian catastrophe is worth the price if capitalist accumulation can have even a slight hope of a faster return to normalcy.

Years of cuts to scientific research, aided by monopolization of vaccine production by a handful of giant companies, has left capitalist medical science in a situation of continuous deterioration. As physical production is atomized more and more in the line of the just-in-time model, so too is intellectual production. Anything that does not have to do with the immediate problem at hand for capital, always this or that immediate question of increasing profitability, does not deserve to be studied. Hence, even amidst the coronavirus crisis the French university system is facing giant funding cuts and the US Center for Disease Control continues to have its budget slashed.

The United States and the Spanish state have been closing down hospitals en masse as finance capital takes ever greater hold of their medical systems. Capital in France, the Spanish State, Italy, the UK, and the United States, the first four despite their universal healthcare systems, have been unwilling to roll-out the massive testing and public information campaigns necessary to slow the virus without lockdown. All countries will find that after years of cuts

and privatizations to social services, their medical systems will be totally overwhelmed. Italy is already showing this fact even in Lombardia, which has one of the best medical infrastructures in the world.

Homelessness, migrant camps, and informal housing have all grown up with increasing rapidity over the last half-century of neoliberal attacks on the global working class. The situation is especially combustible in the United States, Greece, and around the continent of Africa. Immediate freeing and housing of all non-violent, political, and medically compromised prisoners and the closure of immigrant detention centers must happen to protect these victims of the capitalist state. The homelessness crisis can be solved in the short term through requisitioning state property and hotels, as is shown concretely by what is happening in California. In the longer term, there must be a massive program to create green infrastructure and housing for all homeless people.

Austerity caused the crisis

Relatively fast responses from South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand have shown that what is really causing the severity of the pandemic is not the virus itself but the international class forces acting on the social structure.

To take one quick example, South Korea's response has been shaped with the living memory of the democratic and workers' upsurge in 2015-2016 known as the "Candlelight" movement and the historically high level of class struggle in the country. The latter factor, entailing a long history of strikes and especially combative trade unions, is the reason that even amidst an IMF bail-out in the late 1990s, South Korea achieved a universal health-care system and one of the highest general standards of care in the world. The Candlelight movement was a broad mass movement supported by the traditionally militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. Ultimately, the South Koreans unseated President Park Geun-hye through their mobilizations. The movement was against government corruption in general, but one of the particular sparks that led to its explosion was the mishandling and state cover-up of the MERS infection. If conditions were only slightly different, the situation in South Korea in 2015 could have been very similar to that in Italy today.

Care by the Korean National Institute of Health, along with other more meager benefits, are allotted to the working class partially due to fear from the capitalists of a new wave of combativity, and partially as a concession to maintain the extreme levels of precarity that many workers face. The current president, Moon Jae-In, is himself a physical representative of this supposed compromise, coming into office after the Candlelight movement on a promise of designating "irregular" workers as regular in return for labor peace. So far, the workers have been relatively calm, but they are still "irregular."

The political situation in South Korea is the reason why they have been able to meet the pandemic on more or less firm ground. Fearing an explosion and loss of legitimacy on a much larger scale than what followed the MERS outbreak, the government has been forced to act quickly and resolutely to combat the spread of COVID. It is surely looking to keep productivity as high as possible while the rest of the world is in crisis, hence seeking an aggressive alternative to lockdown.

Private property impedes response

Although the world is largely still at the beginning of this pandemic, capitalist control of production is already showing itself to be a brake on fighting the coronavirus. On an international level, different national capitals are attempting to

monopolize production of therapeutics and the eventual vaccine. One of the most promising palliatives (drugs that can reduce or eliminate symptoms but not a "cure") that is being tested is called remdesivir, whose production is currently patented by the U.S. pharmaceutical company Gilead. A double fight has broken out in China as a local biotechnology firm, BrightGene Bio-Medical Technology, has been stopped from mass-producing the drug. The reasons for BrightGene's cease and desist orders are that they do not hold a patent and have not been approved by the state. For its part, BrightGene had the same plan as any other capitalist company, to patent the medicine where it can and maximize its own profits.

A secret bidding war of sorts emerged between the German and U.S. governments over the German company CureVac, which is hoping to develop an experimental vaccine ready for trials by July. The United States government is funding multiple pharmaceutical companies in relation to the crisis but is not making all of them public.

As in pharmaceuticals, so in machines. The British firm Intersurgical refused to give specifications on desperately needed respirator parts to Italian engineers who had found a way to mass produce them through 3D printing. The story is the same with much medical equipment, in which the last decades of strengthening intellectual property rights have meant that respirators and other life-saving tools are impossible to fix due to proprietary software locks and the like.

Climate destruction

The coronavirus pandemic cannot be separated from the general environmental crisis that we are experiencing. Deforestation, factory farming, and destruction of traditional relationships with land are contributing factors of the first order to both processes. At the same time, it is important to realize that the worst possible impact of a total non-response to the virus would pale in comparison to the climate catastrophe that we know is coming within the next decade if decisive action is not taken. Of course, to say this is not to call for inaction in fighting COVID-19; instead we must learn from capitalism's response to both of its crises.

In the first place, this pandemic shows that capitalism is fundamentally incapable of preparing for international crises, much less ones on the scale of the coming disasters. Entire fields of study are devoted to detailing the reality of pandemics, involving huge international commissions like the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, which gave warnings about the effects of climate change and other environmental dangers for decades. Yet despite a wealth of warnings, including ones that displayed full awareness of the inevitable impact of either global pandemic or climate change, the capitalist response has been reactive and largely carried out on the scale of individual nation states rather than the necessary international scale.

Secondly, the measures put in place to fight coronavirus tragically delayed but still far more rapid than the response to climate change has shown that humans are fully capable of restructuring the whole of our productive activity to try to meet a crisis. The tepidness and fear with which most countries have responded to COVID-19 show only that capitalism fears any slowdown of its expansion more than it fears massive death and suffering. Still, the response as it is unfolding includes retooling production, massive upscaling to produce medical supplies, and shutting down "unnecessary" aspects of the economy.

Lastly, quarantined areas, some of the most industrialized in the world, have seen emissions drop between 25-50%. Along with the fact that people are not generally starving in the fallout of the pandemic, there is no more dramatic proof that the climate crisis is fundamentally a crisis of capitalism. Simply focusing our lives away from the maximum production of profit has already made a dramatic change in the human impact on climate change.

The moment must be seized for a massive build-out of green and renewable infrastructure. Keep the airplanes down; replace them with domestic and international high-speed rail. Nationalize the energy sector with no compensation, and use it only to fuel the immediate construction of wind and solar fields to replace all oil, natural gas, and coal power within five years. These actions must be taken to allow the drop in pollutants to continue to reach a sustainable point.

Authoritarian tendencies are augmented

In response to its own initial non-response, the capitalist class is being forced to take measures through its state apparatus that necessitate a severe curtailing of movement by working people. Already, Trump is setting the tone for all bourgeois states by suspending union elections and continuing ICE raids into the pandemic. Israel and Singapore are using the crisis to expand their already extensive systems of spying. Instead of providing medical aid for the population, capitalists are taking the opportunity to roll back civil liberties for working people and extend "anti-terrorism" initiatives. Bolivia's post-coup "president," Jeanine Añez, announced on March 17 that police and military troops will use force on citizens in order to enforce restrictive measures against the virus.

Even on its own terms, the turn towards authoritarianism does nothing to slow the virus. While monitoring the movement of the working class, shutting down meetings, and carrying out a heavy program of repression against people who venture out of their house for personal reasons, the capitalist state is forcing workers into sectors that are totally inessential in this time of crisis. In Italy, where the confirmed spread of the virus is highest after China, industrial production is just now (March 24) being slowed down, a full 20 days after the initial orders to "lockdown" the country.

Anti-Chinese racism

While COVID emerged in China and the Chinese government was negligent in its initial response to the disease, this has absolutely nothing to do with the ruling-class weaponization of the coronavirus scare against people of Asian descent. In fact, similar viruses have emerged in North America, South America, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. These cases through pure luck did not become global pandemics. The fundamental causes of these diseases are due to factory farming, deforestation, and capitalist inaction. Despite this, capitalist politicians have launched campaigns to divert anger away from themselves and toward people of Chinese and more broadly Asian descent.

The tactic of spreading racial hatred is present in the capitalists of all countries, but the most emblematic example is Donald Trump. Trump, who lied about the virus' severity in order to protect himself and capital's short-term profits, is now scrambling to find a response to the crisis. Confused and exposed, he is constantly trying to shift the fault behind the U.S. situation to both the Chinese government and the Chinese people. Amidst an ongoing trade war with China, the scapegoating comes after a year-long build-up of U.S.-aligned ruling class animosity towards the Chinese. While the real conflict is between capitalist powers, the effect has been to divide the working class. Workers have no stake in the inter-imperialist rivalry, and we must reject every instance and attempt of using the coronavirus to turn us against each other.

This is labor's fight to win

Without militancy, the working class stands to have more and more of its rights trampled on under the guise of

preventing the spread of coronavirus. On the one hand, clear delineation needs to be made by trade unions, working-class parties, and social movement organizations about what is really scientifically necessary to fight the pandemic. On the other, every opportunity to fight the bosses for better conditions, higher wages, and bold programs of action must be taken to not lose momentum or get stuck in an unnecessarily defensive posture.

Capital is attempting to get every last ounce of surplus value out of the working class, coronavirus be damned. Big car manufacturers all over the world have been attempting to stay open with virtually no safety measures. In the U.S., most plants shut down in mid-March, though the giant BMW SUV factory in South Carolina plans to keep production humming until April 3, when the company expects that a shortage of parts will cause it to become idle. In Italy, the Spanish State, and the U.S., auto workers struck against being forced to work in dangerous positions at plants producing FIAT, GM, Ford, Mercedes, and other major brands. These actions are being mirrored in retail trade, transportation, and many other sectors. They show that even in this desperate situation, the working class holds the solution to capitalism's insanity.

Trade unions and workers' parties around the world have the opportunity to show clear leadership and vision in this time of crisis. Where the capitalists force workers into unsafe factories, buses, and stores, workers have taken their own initiative to say no and go on strike. Now is the time for the unions to organize coordinated inter-sectoral strikes against unsafe conditions and for workers' rights. Instead of waiting for the government to order retooling to meet medical needs, the trade unions can begin to call for massive social works projects to meet the crisis, and where capital is reluctant, begin to organize for it. The labor movement also has the ability to be the center of education through multimedia projects and campaigns that share workers' stories internationally, give regular updates from unionized medical professionals, and inform the whole labor movement about victories and solidarity campaigns against the bosses and their states.

The unions must become defenders of the entire working class organized and unorganized. An urgent task facing the workers movement is the building of mass organizations of the unemployed to demand housing, incomes, an end to foreclosures, and a national health-care system.

Ultimately, the needs of the working class cannot be met under capitalism. The workers' movement must put forward a militant class-struggle program aimed at rallying working people to replace the current governments of the bosses and their parties with revolutionary anti-capitalist governments that are fully representative of the working class and its allies, and that act directly to fulfill their needs.

A program of action and solidarity

Capitalism stands totally disgraced. Even amidst a global pandemic and the coming ecological collapse, the ruling class in every country is trying to save its own profits at the expense of humanity. Workers have nothing at all to gain from supporting the capitalists, their programs, or their parties. Instead, working people must put forward our own solutions to the crisis and struggle with every weapon we have to achieve them. We call for:

"Â Centralized, international commissions of doctors and engineers to coordinate a global response to the pandemic!

"Â Retool all non-essential production to provide medical and safety equipment and begin a massive build-out of green infrastructure!

"Â No bans, no walls, amnesty for all immigrants and refugees, with full citizenship rights now!

Statement by Socialist Resurgence on Covid-19

"Â Democratic decision-making carried out through public discussion on all restrictions of movement!

"Â Free housing, food, and medical care throughout the crisis! Pay for it through the military budgets, with 100% tax on all income over \$250,000!

"Â Hazard pay of at least 200% for all workers and full implementation of workplace safety measures! Completely free child care now! Stop all foreclosures, freeze all rents and mortgages, and stop all evictions for the duration of this crisis!

"Â Evacuate the prisons! Free all non-violent, immuno-compromised, and elderly prisoners, and provide quality housing!

"Â Drastically increase funding for domestic violence resources and education! No one stuck in quarantine with an abuser!

"Â Decrease hours without a decrease in pay for all who must work! All the necessities for those who are not working!

"Â Abortion is an essential service! Free and safe access for all who need it!

"Â Aid, not sanctions! Reparations for colonized countries now! Cancel all imperialist debt!

" Removal of all imperialist troops from the neo-colonial world; re-assign them for immediate use in aid efforts!

" No bailouts for big business or the banks! Nationalize production and finance under democratic workers' control!

24 March 2020

Source [Socialist Resurgence](#).

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.