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Household and care workers, forgotten in the Covid-19 crisis

31 March 2020, by Marina Díaz, Maureen Zelaya Paredes

Although this sector performs a fundamental job for the reproduction of social and economic life, it has historically been invisible, precarious and poorly paid. As a group it is forgotten both in terms of the health and social crisis and the measures that the government has proposed to deal with this situation.

Firstly, confining oneself at home or working remotely is not an option for professions such as care and reveals the clear limitations of teleworking as a work option in the midst of the current confinement. The message # QuédateEnCasa has a clear bias to the detriment of the most precarious of the working class, not only because it is materially unfeasible, but, with having a greater number of people from a family confined at home, domestic tasks multiply . The situation is aggravated for women who do not have their immigration status regularized and whose mobility capacity is even more limited, as happens with live-in carers, who at this juncture undergo semi-slavery work without any day of rest or recognition of overtime. Meanwhile, those who work as externals must continue to move to their workplace without any protection, putting their health and that of the families, both their own and the families they care for, at risk.

Their exposure is high and not only because of the possibility of being affected by coronavirus, but because the stipulated measures are not an option for them, since they do not have any type of unemployment benefit. For domestic and care workers, ERTE (temporary redundancy) is not an answer because, although this type of measure in itself attacks the rights of the working class, it cannot work when basic employment rights are lacking. This unfair situation calls for the ratification of Convention 189 of the International Labour Organization: equalization of employment rights and the incorporation of the home and care work sector in the general scheme. Here we find another obstacle: the Immigration Law, which stipulates the figure of "arraigo" as a possibility of regularization if the person can demonstrate they have resided for at least three continuous years in the country. Typically, women who are live-in carers choose this figure to regularize their immigration status but, while the required time is over, they are forced to work in the black economy without any rights. We could, here, add institutional racism to that intersection of inequalities faced by female domestic and care workers.

However, the current situation is making the care crisis palpable: How many fathers and mothers, still in confinement, need women caregivers to care for their sons and daughters while they are teleworking? How many families depend on one person, woman and migrant, take care of their elders? How many homes continue to be kept clean and disinfected because a woman, usually a migrant and in many cases living in, does so? And despite this, more than 630,000 women have been excluded from current or future mitigation measures derived from this situation, obviating the historical inequality of their working conditions with respect to the rest of the workers.

Today more than ever it is necessary to continue demanding the ratification of Convention 189, but also urgent measures that are included in an Emergency Plan for the prevention of occupational risks for domestic and care workers against COVID-19 that, minimally, includes:

- That employers and employers are obliged to provide protective materials such as gloves and masks for commuting and use in the workplace, especially for those who work with the elderly.
- That certificates are issued that certify the need for displacement, regardless of whether or not the worker is in a regulated migratory situation, without a contract.
- Wage compensation for extra work performed in all cases.
- Guarantees that the police or any state force do not request immigration documentation in the midst of this situation

For this reason, this Monday, 23 March, domestic and care workers have launched a campaign calling on

the population to forward a standard letter to the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, but also Pablo Iglesias, Yolanda Díaz, José Luis Escrivá and Irene Montero.

When minimum care is not guaranteed for those who care in a special condition of social and economic vulnerability, it is necessary to review what it means to "put life at the centre" as the engine of the egalitarian society for which we fight.

23 March 2020

Translated by ***International Viewpoint*** *from* ***Poder Popular*** *"Las trabajadoras del hogar y cuidados, olvidadas en la crisis y sus medidas frente al COVID-19."*.

This is a Global Pandemic – Let's Treat it as Such

31 March 2020, by Adam Hanieh

In response, numerous social movements have put forward demands that take seriously the potentially disastrous consequences of the virus, while also tackling the incapacity of capitalist governments to adequately address the crisis itself. These demands include questions of worker safety, the necessity of neighbourhood level organising, income and social security, the rights of those on zero-hour contracts or in precarious employment, and the need to protect renters and those living in poverty. In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis has sharply underscored the irrational nature of health care systems structured around corporate profit – the almost universal cutbacks to public hospital staffing and infrastructure (including critical care beds and ventilators), the lack of public health provision and prohibitive cost of access to medical services in many countries, and the ways in which the property rights of pharmaceutical companies serve to restrict widespread access to potential therapeutic treatments and the development of vaccines.

However, the global dimensions of COVID-19 have figured less prominently in much of the left discussion. Mike Davis has rightly observed that "the danger to the global poor has been almost totally ignored by journalists and Western governments" and left debates have been similarly circumscribed, with attention largely focused on the severe health care crises unfolding in Europe and the US. Even inside Europe there is extreme unevenness in the capacity of states to deal with this crisis – as the juxtaposition of Germany and Greece illustrates – but a much greater disaster is about to envelop the rest of the world. In response, our perspective on this pandemic must become truly global, based on an understanding of how the public health aspects of this virus intersect with larger questions of political economy (including the likelihood of a prolonged and severe global economic downturn). This is not the time to pull up the (national) hatches and speak simply of the fight against the virus inside our own borders.

Public Health in the South

As with all so-called 'humanitarian' crises, it is essential to remember that the social conditions found across most of the countries of the South are the direct product of how these states are inserted into the hierarchies of the world market. Historically, this included a long encounter with Western colonialism, which has continued, into contemporary times, with the subordination of poorer countries to the interests of the world's wealthiest states and largest transnational corporations. Since the mid-1980s, repeated bouts of structural adjustment – often accompanied by Western military action, debilitating sanctions regimes, or support for authoritarian rulers – have systematically destroyed the social and economic capacities of poorer states, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with major crises such as COVID-19.

Foregrounding these historical and global dimensions helps make clear that the enormous scale of the current crisis is not simply a question of viral epidemiology and a lack of biological resistance to a novel pathogen. The ways that most people across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia will experience the coming pandemic is a direct consequence of a global economy systemically structured around the exploitation of the resources and peoples of the South. In this sense, the pandemic is very much a social and human-made disaster – not simply a calamity arising from natural or biological causes.

One clear example of how this disaster is human-made is the poor state of public health systems across most countries in the South, which tend to be underfunded and lacking in adequate medicines, equipment, and staff. This is particularly significant for understanding the threat presented by COVID-19 due to the rapid and very large surge in serious and critical cases that typically require hospital admission as a result of the virus (currently estimated at around 15%-20% of confirmed cases). This fact is now widely discussed in the context of Europe and the US, and lies behind the strategy of 'flattening the curve' in order to alleviate the pressure on hospital critical care capacity.

Yet, while we rightly point to the lack of ICU beds, ventilators, and trained medical staff across many Western states, we must recognise that the situation in most of the rest of the world is immeasurably worse. Malawi,

for example, has about 25 ICU beds for a population of 17 million people. There are less than 2.8 critical care beds/100,000 people on average across South Asia, with Bangladesh possessing around 1100 such beds for a population of over 157 million (0.7 critical care beds/100,000 people). In comparison, the shocking pictures coming out of Italy are occurring in an advanced health care system with an average 12.5 ICU beds/100,000 (and the ability to bring more online). The situation is so serious that many poorer countries do not even have information on ICU availability, with one 2015 academic paper estimating that "more than 50% of [low income] countries lack any published data on ICU capacity." Without such information it is difficult to imagine how these countries could possibly plan to meet the inevitable demand for critical care arising from COVID-19.

Of course, the question of ICU and hospital capacity is one part of a much larger set of issues including a widespread lack of basic resources (e.g. clean water, food, and electricity), adequate access to primary medical care, and the presence of other comorbidities (such as high rates of HIV and tuberculosis). Taken as a whole, all of these factors will undoubtedly mean a vastly higher prevalence of critically ill patients (and hence overall fatalities) across poorer countries as a result of COVID-19.

Labour and Housing are Public Health Issues

Debates around how best to respond to COVID-19 in Europe and the US have illustrated the mutually-reinforcing relationship between effective public health measures and conditions of labour, precarity, and poverty. Calls for people to self-isolate when sick – or the enforcement of longer periods of mandatory lockdowns – are economically impossible for the many people who cannot easily shift their work online or those in the service sector who work in zero-hour contracts or other kinds of temporary employment. Recognising the fundamental consequences of these work patterns for public health, many European governments have announced sweeping promises around compensation for those made unemployed or forced to stay at home during this crisis.

It remains to be seen how effective these schemes will be and to what degree they will actually meet the needs of the very large numbers of people who will lose their jobs as a result of the crisis. Nonetheless, we must recognise that such schemes will simply not exist for most of the world's population. In countries where the majority of the labour force is engaged in informal work or depends upon unpredictable daily wages – much of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia – there is no feasible way that people can choose to stay home or self-isolate. This must be viewed alongside the fact that there will almost certainly be very large increases in the 'working poor' as a direct result of the crisis. Indeed, the ILO has estimated for its worst-case scenario (24.7 million job losses globally) that the number of people in low and low-middle income countries earning less than $US 3.20/day at PPP will grow by nearly 20 million people.

Once again, these figures are important not solely because of day-to-day economic survival. Without the mitigation effects offered through quarantine and isolation, the actual progress of the disease in the rest of the world will certainly be much more devastating than the harrowing scenes witnessed to date in China, Europe, and the US.

Moreover, workers involved in informal and precarious labour often live in slums and overcrowded housing – ideal conditions for the explosive spread of the virus. As an interviewee with the *Washington Post* recently noted in relation to Brazil: "More than 1.4 million people — nearly a quarter of Rio's population — live in one of the city's favelas. Many can't afford to miss a single day of work, let alone weeks. People will continue leaving their houses …. The storm's about to hit."

Similarly disastrous scenarios face the many millions of people currently displaced through war and conflict. The Middle East, for example, is the site of the largest forced displacement since the Second World War, with massive numbers of refugees and internally-displaced people as a result of the on-going wars in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. Most of these people live in refugee camps or overcrowded urban spaces, and often lack the rudimentary rights to health care typically associated with citizenship. The widespread prevalence of malnutrition and other diseases (such as the reappearance of cholera in Yemen) make these displaced communities particularly susceptible to the virus itself.

One microcosm of this can be seen in the Gaza Strip, where over 70% of the population are refugees living in one of the most densely packed areas in the world. The first two cases of COVID-19 were identified in Gaza on 20 March (a lack of testing equipment, however, has meant that only 92 people out of the 2-million strong population have been tested for the virus). Reeling from 13-years of Israeli siege and the systematic destruction of essential infrastructure, living conditions in the Strip are marked by extreme poverty, poor sanitation, and a chronic lack of drugs and medical equipment (there are, for example, only 62 ventilators in Gaza, and just 15 of these are currently available for use). Under blockade and closure for most of the past decade, Gaza has been shut to the world long before the current pandemic. The region could be the proverbial canary in the COVID-19 coalmine – foreshadowing the future path of the infection among refugee communities across the Middle East and elsewhere.

Intersecting Crises

The imminent public health crisis facing poorer countries as a consequence of COVID-19 will be further deepened by an associated global economic downturn that is almost certain to exceed the scale of 2008. It is too early to predict the depth of this slump, but many leading financial institutions are expecting this to be the worst recession in living memory. One of the reasons for this is

the near simultaneous shutdown of manufacturing, transport, and service sectors across the US, Europe, and China – an event without historical precedent since the Second World War. With one-fifth of the world's population currently under some form of lockdown, supply chains and global trade have collapsed and stock market prices have plunged – with most major exchanges losing between 30-40% of their value between 17 February and 17 March.

Yet, as Eric Touissant has emphasised, the economic collapse we are now fast approaching was not caused by COVID-19 – rather, the virus presented "the spark or trigger" of a deeper crisis that has been in the making for several years. Closely connected to this are the measures put in place by governments and central banks since 2008, most notably the policies of quantitative easing and repeated interest-rate cuts. These policies aimed at propping up share prices through massively increasing the supply of ultra-cheap money to financial markets. They meant a very significant growth in all forms of debt – corporate, government, and household. In the U.S, for example, the nonfinancial corporate debt of large companies reached $10 trillion dollars in mid-2019 (around 48% of GDP), a significant rise from its previous peak in 2008 (when it stood at about 44%). Typically, this debt was not used for productive investment, but rather for financial activities (such as funding dividends, share buybacks, and merger and acquisitions). We thus have the well-observed phenomena of booming stock markets on one hand, and stagnating investment and declining profit levels on the other.

Significant to the coming crisis, however, is the fact that the growth in corporate debt has been largely concentrated in below investment grade bonds (so-called junk bonds), or bonds that are rated BBB, just one grade above junk status. Indeed, according to Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager, BBB debt made up a remarkable 50% of the global bond market in 2019, compared to only 17% in 2001. What this means is that the synchronised collapse of worldwide production, demand, and financial asset prices presents a massive problem for corporations needing to refinance their debt. As economic activity grinds to a halt in key sectors, companies whose debt is due to be rolled over now face a credit market that has essentially shuttered – no one is willing to lend in these conditions and many overleveraged companies (especially those involved in sectors such as airlines, retail, energy, tourism, automobiles, and leisure) could be earning almost no revenue over the coming period. The prospect of a wave of high profile corporate bankruptcies, defaults, and credit downgrades is therefore extremely likely. This is not just a US problem – financial analysts have recently warned of a 'cash crunch' and a 'wave of bankruptcies' across the Asia Pacific region, where corporate debt levels have doubled to $32 trillion over the last decade.

All of this poses a very grave danger to the rest of the world, where a variety of transmission routes will metastasise the downturn across poorer countries and populations. As with 2008, these include a likely plunge in exports, a sharp pull back in foreign direct investment flows and tourism revenues, and a drop in worker remittances. The latter factor is often forgotten in the discussion of the current crisis, but it is essential to remember that one of the key features of neoliberal globalisation has been the integration of large parts of the world's population into global capitalism through remittance flows from family members working overseas. In 1999, only eleven countries worldwide had remittances greater than 10 per cent of GDP; by 2016, this figure had risen to thirty countries. In 2016, just over 30 per cent of all 179 countries for which data was available recorded remittance levels greater than 5 per cent of GDP – a proportion that has doubled since 2000. Astonishingly, around one billion people – one out of seven people globally – are directly involved in remittance flows as either senders or recipients. The closing down of borders because of COVID-19 – coupled with the halt to economic activities in key sectors where migrants tend to predominate – means we could be facing a precipitous drop in worker remittances globally. This is an outcome that would have very severe ramifications for countries in the South.

Another key mechanism by which the rapidly evolving economic crisis may hit countries in the South is the large build up of debt held by poorer countries in recent years. This includes both the least developed countries in the world as well as so-called 'emerging markets'. In late 2019, the Institute for International Finance estimated that emerging market debt stood at $72 trillion, a figure that had doubled since 2010. Much of this debt is denominated in US dollars, which exposes its holders to fluctuations in the value of the US currency. In recent weeks the US dollar has strengthened significantly as investors sought a safe-haven in response to the crisis; as a result, other national currencies have fallen, and the burden of interest and principal repayments on $US-denominated debt has been increasing. Already in 2018, 46 countries were spending more on public debt service than on their health care systems as a share of GDP. Today, we are entering an alarming situation where many poorer countries will face increasingly burdensome debt repayments while simultaneously attempting to manage an unprecedented public health crisis – all in the context of a very deep global recession.

And let us not harbour any illusions that these intersecting crises might bring an end to structural adjustment or the emergence of some kind of 'global social democracy'. As we have repeatedly seen over the last decade, capital frequently seizes moments of crisis as a moment of opportunity – a chance to implement radical change that was previously blocked or appeared impossible. Indeed, World Bank President David Malpass implied as much when he noted at the (virtual) G20 meeting of Finance Ministers a few days ago: "Countries will need to implement structural reforms to help shorten the time to recovery … For those countries that have excessive regulations, subsidies, licensing regimes, trade protection or litigiousness as obstacles, we will work with them to foster markets, choice and faster growth prospects

during the recovery."

It is essential to bring all these international dimensions to the centre of the left debate around COVID-19, linking the fight against the virus to questions such as the abolition of 'Third World' debt, an end to IMF/World Bank neoliberal structural adjustment packages, reparations for colonialism, a halt to the global arms trade, an end to sanctions regimes, and so forth. All of these campaigns are, in effect, global public health issues – they bear directly on the ability of poorer countries to mitigate the effects of the virus and the associated economic downturn. It is not enough to speak of solidarity and mutual self-help in our own neighbourhoods, communities, and within our national borders – without raising the much greater threat that this virus presents to the rest of the world. Of course high levels of poverty, precarious conditions of labour and housing, and a lack of adequate health infrastructure also threaten the ability of populations across Europe and the US to mitigate this infection. But grassroots campaigns in the South are building coalitions that tackle these issues in interesting and internationalist ways. Without a global orientation, we risk reinforcing the ways that the virus has seamlessly fed into the discursive political rhetoric of nativist and xenophobic movements – a politics deeply seeped in authoritarianism, an obsession with border controls, and a 'my-country first' national patriotism.

27 March 2020

Source Verso blog.

Brazil's workers strike for the right to quarantine

31 March 2020, by Silvia Ferrero, Waldo Mermelstein

No Borders News: Briefly describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Silvia Ferreira/Waldo Mermelstein: The pandemic is growing exponentially in Brazil, currently doubling each 2 and a half days, that is, similar to the rate in Italy several weeks ago. As of today, we have 1546 infected people (nearly 40% of them in state of São Paulo), and 25 deaths, but the real number of cases cannot be accurately estimated and monitored due to the absolute lack of widespread testing. Experts say that it could spread much more rapidly due to the lack of early measures, the partial quarantines limited to only some states, and Brazil's social conditions.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

SF/WM: President Jair Bolsonaro has been in deep denial, early on decrying social apprehension as "hysteria." He even dared to go to a right-wing demonstration on March 15, touching and embracing people, even though several members of his personal staff were already sick. The result of Bolsonaro's indifference — combined with the visible economic effects in the real economy (the country's GDP was expected to decrease up to 4% this year before the Covid-19 crisis began— is intense criticism aimed at the central government from the main political parties, including the president of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house). Therefore, the federal government currently has its worst approval rating since it took office, 41% strongly disapproving and 25% supporting it. The Health Ministry did finally adopt belated measures such as spreading basic information about how to prevent the contagion.

Meanwhile, local and state governments have taken the lead and last week started to recommend social distancing, closing all schools, restriction the functioning of non-essential businesses in some states, but as of today, no such decision has been made from the national government in Brasilia. However, even local and state governments have not adopted the approach of "locking down" as applied by other countries, such as China and Italy, and recently Argentina. The general official approach, until now, has failed to massively distribute sanitizers and masks to the population, likewise, there is no massive testing underway.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

SF/WM: The president used his public speeches to put his denial of the tragic dimensions of the epidemic on display, and has not opted for massive testing to follow the evolution of the epidemic in order to detect the main areas of contagion. Only several thousands of people have been tested, those presenting with severe symptoms at hospitals. At the same time, the president is criticizing and undermining some more restrictive measures adopted by state governors (such as those of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the very epicenter of the epidemic), calling them "lunatic," and decrying measures already adopted to close non-essential public activities as "job killers." There are no complete quarantines in any part of the country,

nor any measures to distribute masks and sanitizers to the population at no cost, items which have almost disappeared from the markets.

Brazil has a very important basic public health structure, created in 1989, after the end of the dictatorship, with nearly 40 thousand primary care centers. These could be used to prevent overcrowding hospitals and emergency centers. But this system has been severely underfunded in the last decades, and in 2017 things became worse with the passing of a Constitutional Amendment (EC95) that froze all social investments for the following 20 years in the name of austerity, affecting especially the most isolated and/or destitute populations. Making matters much worse, we must stress that Brazil is the seventh most unequal country in the world: two-thirds of its population earning less than 2 minimum wages (the current value of the minimum wage is approximately 200 U.S. dollars per month), 6% of the population live in slums (the favelas), and 50% of the population does not have indoor plumbing.

Therefore, the impact of the epidemic in the context of an economy that was already entering recession before this health crisis will be disastrous. On the other hand, large-scale investment in the public health system, combined with the nationalization of the private health system, and the immediate hiring of thousands of people to work directly in the communities using the public health system's primary care facilities could be a powerful tool to combat the disease.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

SF/WM: The president has spent his time denying the urgency of a national response, and attacking other initiatives by local governments, and, as of today, has not taken any measure to quarantine the people and save millions of lives. On the other hand, the government rushed to help big companies with billions of reais (Brazil's currency), authorizing them to reduce their employees' wages by up to 50%, while promising merely a three-month bonus of 200 reais (nearly U$40.00) for precarious workers who amount more than 20 million people.

Local and state governments have suspended many activities, such as in São Paulo, which is governed by a neoliberal, rightwing party (Brazilian Social Democracy Party – PSDB) that suspended all non-essential businesses, but did not declare a total quarantine, which is the only way of sparing untold lives.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

SF/WM: The main struggle of the unions today is that workers in all sectors must have the right to quarantine, without losing their wages. University classes have been suspended and teachers sent home, along with all university workers. In public schools, winter holidays were approaching so teachers are receiving their salaries. But subcontracted workers in the schools were laid off as they are not regular public employees. Private schools are now attending online classes. However, there are other sectors fighting for the same right.

Metalworkers are negotiating to stop the factories and to not have any reduction of their salaries or layoffs. In the Cherry car factory in São José dos Campos, workers mobilized and managed to revoke dismissals. Metro workers in São Paulo demanded that workers over the age of 60 be allowed to self-quarantine along with those who have pre-existing conditions or diseases or are in high risk groups. At the same time, they are still struggling to reduce the flow of in-service trains.

The construction industry has not laid off their workers, but several unions are fighting for the right to cease work without financial losses, as was the case in Fortaleza, and in the state of Ceara, where workers won 15 days off. But the reality is that the majority of workers still do not have the right to quarantine, including bank and call center workers. These last groups were protesting last week in front of company headquarters in São Paulo, demanding not to be included as essential labor and, therefore, allowed to leave work.

The children of domestic and daily workers are struggling for bosses to release their parents from their duties without withholding wages. One example shows why. A domestic worker in Rio de Janeiro died from a coronavirus infection that she caught from her boss who had returned from Italy yet refused to allow her domestic worker to be released from the job. In Brazil, there are nearly 6.3 million domestic workers.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

SF/WM: At this moment, there is a mobilization and campaign organized in indigenous villages, led by the APIB (Association of Brazilian Indigenous Peoples) for resources to buy medicines and food to supplies for their villages. The central trade union federations and the Fearless People's Front (Frente Povo Sem Medo) and Brazil's Popular Front, who cancelled street demonstrations against the government set to occur on March 18, are supporting and calling for pot banging protests that are taking place almost every night at 8 pm as thousands hang out their windows and balconies in neighborhoods of the big state capitals to voice their opposition to Bolsonaro. Meanwhile, the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) is demanding the suspension of all foreclosures and land repossession operations.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

SF/WM: Several popular movements in the poor neighborhoods and the Black movement are collecting food and medicines for people who work without a formal labor contract or are unemployed. These groups are demanding the government pay one minimum wage to each of them

instead of the infamous 200 reais promised by Bolsonaro.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

SF/WM: A new political situation has emerged in Brazil. There is growing social unrest against Bolsonaro's ludicrous statements and his complete lack of ability to lead the country in the midst of its biggest social and health challenge ever. This process may evolve in different directions, ranging from the establishment of an informal parliamentary regime (unofficially pushing Brazils president aside), the impeachment of the president, or a sort of coup d'état granting more power to Bolsonaro. The combination of the epidemic with the impending economic and social crises and the ultra-neoliberal policies undertaken by the central government may create even more complicated and explosive scenarios in the coming weeks and months.

*Source **No Borders News**.*

Self-isolation and class consciousness

31 March 2020, by Andy Stowe

Corbyn's period of leadership of the Labour Party sometimes offered a glimpse of what a lively, mobilized mass party could do by drawing hundreds of thousands of people into political activity. Yet the very end of the Corbyn era is exactly when the British working class is revealing that it still retains its capacity to self-organize outside the structures of any of the big parties or trade unions. [1]

More than that – the Tory finance minister Rishi Sunak pushed through a package of measures The Times newspaper described as "a state intervention that goes beyond Jeremy Corbyn's wildest dreams". [2] It includes a guarantee that the state will pay 80% of the wages up to £2500 of any worker forced to stay at home. He later introduced a similar measure for the self-employed. From the party which made food banks and deep poverty for millions of people a hallmark of its time in government this is a staggering transformation. Sunak is stealing much of Corbynism's programme to respond to the crisis.

As it became apparent that the British government would have to take measures to control the spread of the pandemic similar to what has been happening in Spain, Italy and France, groups of people, often previously unknown to each other, started pulling together networks at the level of boroughs, individual streets and housing estates.

Generally speaking, the people involved barely knew each other. Some were already involved in the Labour Party or community groups, but an influx of new volunteers made the difference.

A spontaneous movement

Facebook, WhatsApp and Zoom are the tools this spontaneous movement uses. People volunteer to queue to get shopping for a person they don't know and whom they might only see very briefly as they drop off the food and newspaper. Some volunteer to walk the dog of a stranger who is housebound due to a medical condition. Others offer to phone a person living alone so that they can have some human contact.

The British state has failed at a national and a local level to do anything like this. Local councils used to deliver hot meals to the elderly and housebound. Relentless cuts imposed by the Tories which these councils barely resisted put an end to that years ago. Intimate care at home for the elderly has been outsourced to private companies which are notorious for hyper-exploiting low paid women and migrant workers. Mental health services for children and adults have been pared to the bone, and when the pandemic has ended hundreds of horror stories will emerge of how families coped with a mentally ill relative who was confined inside the home for weeks.

Volunteers in these micro-local support groups know that they are filling in for some of the state's deficiencies. But what makes them do it as a socialist instinct for collective action and solidarity, including even to an extent those who are doing through a religious community.

In those Zoom meetings and WhatsApp groups many thousands of people are learning that they know how to organize and that they can do it independently. Every day they are seeing that the essential people in society are the working class filling the supermarket shelves, cleaning the hospitals and looking after the elderly. And these workers too will come out of this experience with a sense that they are more important to the world than the bankers and capitalists.

Boris Johnson is likely to be the prime minister remembered for failing to adequately prepare for a pandemic of which his government was given plenty of notice. His time in office will be defined by the thousands of families who were not able to be with dying relatives or attend their funerals. He is enjoying good poll ratings at the moment, but as the tally of the dead increases and a reckoning is made in the coming months, he will be seen to be the architect of the disaster in Britain.

Covid 19 is teaching hundreds of millions of people across the planet that the working class is the truly indispensable class. More than that, it is obliging them to learn how to organise to survive and resist. And it's not an ephemeral moment. All the signs are that months of isolation and

pandemic lie ahead and people's frustrations with the state's failure will build into a fury. This could be the rebirth of a new, militant class consciousness. Keir Starmer, the incoming Labour leader, will do well to remember that. [3]

Footnotes

[1] Jeremy Corbyn announced his resignation as leader of the Labour Party following the December 2019 general election. The election process – first nominations by MPs, affiliated trades union and constituency parties then voting by one member one vote – has been taking place since January and the result will be announced on 4 April.

[2] *The Times* 22 March 2020 "The coronavirus economy: even in wartime, nobody dared to do what Rishi Sunak has".

[3] Keir Starmer is Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras constituency in central London and currently Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, to which he was appointed by Corbyn in 2016. He is widely expected to win the leadership election.

How not to go crazy in lockdown

30 March 2020, by Laia Facet

1. Join a union

If you've been fired from your job too, don't settle for unemployment benefit. Think that the benefit is not being given away, but that it comes from the taxes that the State collects. From everybody? Well, some more than others. The big companies and large fortunes will not contribute anything extra to the public coffers in the face of this crisis. Therefore, the first advice is to join and organize in a union that has not collaborated in the ERTE (Temporary Employment Regulations) and to fight so that the crisis is not paid for as usual.

If you are one of those who have to continue working because the company has decided that the risk of the workers is less important than their profits (but your boss is 'working'), organize with your colleagues. The staff at the Mercedes-Benz factory in Vitoria stood up and made the factory go out of business. So it does work.

In addition, many groups such as domestic workers or sex workers are being put at risk by being forced to continue working or by a drastic reduction in their income without the possibility of accessing unemployment benefit. You can help by contributing to the resistance fund or by participating in the domestic workers' campaign.

If you are one of the essential ones, those who are working in the health sector, in supermarkets, in transport or in residences,... Demand an increase in the number of staff, a risk premium, gloves, masks and other protective material. And of course, that all the resources, infrastructure and private health care personnel are placed under public control immediately.

2. Organise your non-payment of rent

In addition to being unemployed and/or without income, does the government happen to have passed over the rents? If they... They want us confined and unable to pay for the house! The tenants' union is organizing a campaign to demand the suspension of payments to the government and to organize those who will not be able to pay their rent.

The first thing the union says is that you are not alone in this situation (even though we are confined). On the campaign website you will find how to help the campaign and a guide on how to proceed if you find yourself in a situation where you cannot pay your rent. In addition, we are encouraged to make our cases public through social networks.

3. Stop the Covid-19, but also the machismo

Romanticizing confinement is not only a class privilege (as we have been able to read these days on the web) it is also a gender privilege. Confined to the home where for centuries multiple machista injustices are hidden: domestic chores, upbringing, care... and violence.

If macho violence already enjoys a mantle of invisibility and impunity, what is happening today in conditions of confinement? Even if we think we cannot, there too we can help: let's not leave our neighbours alone. If you suspect that women close to you are living this situation, try to contact them, go to the administration, to feminist groups. Let's make sure that the feminist solidarity we have shown these years does not remain confined. To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, we should all have the right to a home of our own to confine ourselves to.

4. Give a helping hand to your neighbours

You may be confined and unable to help your mother or grandmother because they live hundreds of miles

away but you may be able to help those in your block of neighbours. Or maybe you need a helping hand because you're in the at-risk population, because with kids you can't cope or for whatever reason. In any case, you should know that in many neighbourhoods support networks are being organized so that no one in a vulnerable situation should be put at risk. Look for the nearest support network or if it doesn't exist yet, contact associations and groups to get organized.

5. Exercise

Yes, exercising is important and was already recommended by the POUM with Swedish gymnastics.

24 March 2020

Translated by ***International Viewpoint*** *from* ***Poder Popular*** *"¿Cómo no volverte loca en el confinamiento?".*

Popular revolt, feminist mass strikes, and Covid-19 in Chile

30 March 2020, by Javier Pineda

NBN: Describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Javier Pineda: The pandemic has spread rapidly in Chile. On March 3, we had the first infection and it has quickly reached different regions of the country. By way of comparison, we are suffering coronavirus growth rates similar to those in Spain. As of March 22 (day 19), Chile has 632 confirmed Covid-19 cases, whereas Spain had 589 infections after the equivelant time. On the afternoon of Saturday 21, the first Covid-19 death was announced. The victim was an 83-year-old woman who lived in a working-class town in the countryside and she died in a public hospital, despite the fact better-off neighborhoods have higher infection rates at this point.

However, there is a lot of disagreement about that the figures represent. The daily figures recorded by the Ministry of Health have been challenged by the Medical College, since the method by which they are recorded is not known, nor to what date they correspond. Given how the infections are tracked, it is understood that these figures are probably at least two days behind. Moreover, the population of Chile is 18 million people compared to Spain's 46.6 million.

So far, no national quarantine has been decreed. And the closure of pubs, casinos and discos was only decreed last Thursday, March 19 (day 17). The federal authorities do not want to order a quarantine so the suspension of school and university classes resulted from pressure by mayors. Likewise, the companies that have instituted quarantines, or whose workers are teleworking, did so under pressure from workers and not from the authorities. If a comprehensive quarantine is not decreed, we will se figures similar to those in Spain or Italy, or even worse. This Sunday, March 22, the Government announced a nighttime curfew between 10:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m., as if the Covid-19 does not spread during the day.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

JP: The Government was not prepared for this crisis. They have wavered and contradicted themselves. The first measure they adopted was to declare the suspension of classes on March 15 (day 13). They this initiative was, in fact, declared by university administrators and mayors – who direct 30% of Chile's education system. That same day a Committee of Experts convened by the federal government recommended against suspending classes, but an hour later the president announced the suspension on national television due to pressure from the community.

This week, a "National Quarantine" has been aggressively promoted by social and union organizations to mitigate the rate of infection, however, the government still prefers to prioritize corporate profites over our lives.

On Wednesday, March 18 (day 16), the president declared a Catastrophe State of Emergency at the national level, which means that the Armed Forces assume control of public order nationally, granting them powers to limit the right of assembly, freedom of movement, and the protection of personal property. Up until now, the military has not taken any action regarding the catastrophe. Far from coming to the population's aid, in the words of the general in charged of National Defense in the Santiago Metropolitical Region, the military's mission is "to safeguard public order." This health emergency cannot be solved by the military.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's

greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

JP: Our public health system has been dismantled by neoliberal policies. The state divides financing equally between public hospitals – where more than 80% of the population is served – and private clinics, thereby financing their profits.

The health system is not prepared to face this pandemic. The number of beds available is inadequate in relation to the population, so the sustained growth of the pandemic will make it impossible for the health system, both public and private, to respond.

The system's only strength is its professionals who are willing to confront the crisis despite the precarious conditions in which they find themselves. For example, in a hospital in the city of Talcahuano, workers began steam-steralizing masks due to the lack of medical supplies.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

JP: The right and conservative sectors started out trying spreading fear about the pandemic, but once people began to take the issue seriously and demanded that workplaces be shut down, the right began taking reactionary position. There are only a few exceptional right-wing mayors who have come out for a total quarantine after being pressured by the people.

The liberal and social democratic sectors have hesitated, as always. They demand certain measures, but they are not willing to back a total quarantine or closedown a large part of the economy. They have contributed nothing during this emergency.

The parties of the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) and extra-parliamentary left organizations have called for a total quarantine. Left-wing organizations have mainly organized through social organizations, proposing a Preventive General Strike, which has also been called "National Quarantine" and "National Humanitarian Strike" under the slogan that the health and lives of our families is more important than corporate profits.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

JP: Education workers were the first to demand the suspension of classes, winning this goal on Sunday, March 15. Public sector workers also managed to reduce the number of shifts, cutting staffing in most institutions and limiting work to performing only essential functions.

In the case of public health workers, they have been on the "front line," holding back the coronavirus' advance. they have been demanding greater participation in decision-making over how to face the pandemic, although without much success due to the government's refusal to listen.

In general, many unions and workers have raised concerns about the pandemic, demanding the cessation of all activities that are not strictly necessary to confront the contagion. There have been several strikes in workplaces that lack hygiene and safety measures, for instance, public transportation workers and employees in several malls and shopping centers struck over such measures. In short, the unions are promoting a National Quarantine to deal with the pandemic, taking the initiative to shut down all non-essential companies.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

JP: Social movement took the initiative quickly. We had large mobilizations beginning in March, when the feminist movement took the lead after a massive General Feminist Strike on March 8 and 9. However, after the first cases of contagion, and in the face of the government's ineffectiveness, the same popular organizations decided to call for self-care to confront the pandemic, avoiding crowds and deciding to prioritize safeguarding our lives and those of our families.

Among these measures, the "Strike for Life," called by the March 8 Feminist Coalition (Coordinadora Feminista 8M) stands out. Unidad Social, a body that brings together trade union, student, feminist, socio-environmental, and migrant organizations, among others, has called for a "Humanitarian Strike." All of them demand protection for our working class.

In the case of indigenous communities, some roads have been blockaed to prevent tourists and infected people from entering towns that have not yet registered cases of people infected by Covid-19.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

JP: The popular revolt has raised programmatic demands to dismantle neoliberalism, such as guaranteeing social rights for the entire population. This is growing stronger as the pandemic spreads and the effects of a shattered public health system become more obvious. The crisis reveals the precariaty of those who do not eat if they do not work and shows how the state serves employers and not its population.

Thus, the necessity of strengthening the public health system is self-evident, as are job protections and enacting a law prohibiting layoffs during quarantine. We need subsidies for informal and precarious workers and the idea of ??a universal basic income is slowly beginning to take hold. We must maintain basic services such as electricity and water in case of non-payment and establish a moratorium on the payment of debts, along with banning administrative judgments against those in debts while the pandemic lasts. Finally, we require state control of the entire health system and restrictions on the hoarding of basic products and health supplies such as face masks and alcohol gel.

These are concrete measures for confronting the pandemic, but the transformative horizon opened by the Popular Revolt that began in October 2019 remains alive and well.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

JP: In Chile, the Covid-19 contagion must be understood in the context of social and political crisis that began with the Popular Revolt last fall, twin crises that will only be aggravated by a now-inevitable economic crisis.

The government is unfit to face the crisis. Once the quarantine is over, the mobilizations will begin again, since all the problems that triggered the revolt in the first place have not been resolved. Furthermore, although the government has postponed, at least until May 2021, the national referendum on rewriting the Constitution this question cannot be suppressed.

The coming weeks will be critical for dealing with the pandemic and preventing as many deaths as possible. After the emergency passes, we will have to confront layoffs the state must be prevented from passing the cost of the crisis onto the popular sectors and the working classes. We must fight to insist that the wealthy pay for this crisis. Thus, we must continue fighting to kick out conservative President Sebastián Piñera while raising demands such as an increase in pensions and the minimum wage in order to prevent the bosses from making our lives even more precarious. The next few weeks will combine a struggle against the coronavirus with the struggle against Piñera's incompetent government.

25 March 2020

Source No Borders News.

Coronavirus: "We could probably have had a vaccine and/or treatment ready..."

29 March 2020, by Gerard Chaouat

Hello, can you first briefly introduce yourself?

Gérard Chaouat: I am an immunologist, a CNRS researcher in an INSERM unit in a hospital environment, retired since 2009 but emeritus research director, and as such, normally, I go to my lab every day. [1]

Let's start at the beginning: CoVid?

GC: It is a "new" virus, for humans anyway, since it has been present for a long time in pangolin and bats (transmission is more likely to come from the latter). The genome sequence has demonstrated this. There is no need to imagine a plot by the US military or Chinese laboratories. Transmissions of this kind have already occurred: Ebola, AIDS where again conspiracy theories have arisen while the Pasteur teams in France and Cameroon (among others) have demonstrated the role of chimpanzees and/or the green monkey . It is an "emerging"" virus, as was, in its time (2002-2003), SARS-CoV-1, responsible for SARS, also a coronavirus. They belong to the same family, which has nothing to do with flu viruses, but this coronavirus is clearly more contagious than SARS-CoV-1.

You're talking about emerging viruses. Was it "predictable"?

GC: Yes, and I refer to the excellent article in the March edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*. [2] The multiplication of epidemics and pandemics at ever closer intervals is for many eco-scientists linked to globalization: air transport (which takes us in a few hours where caravels took weeks) and road networks "open up" small villages which were previously isolated - which limited the spread - superimposed on the invasion/destruction of ecosystems for mercantile purposes, inevitably causing the "confrontation" of humanity with viruses with which it has had no recent contact . In our case, a new SARS epidemic was inevitable. Hence the existence of alert networks.

But was it predictable, could we have had preventive action?

GC: It is difficult to say "yes" since the ad hoc research was stopped before being successful. A little parallel with other viruses is useful. For flu, for example, we "anticipate" future mutations, so that we vaccinate each year against the epidemic that will occur. This does not exclude an unexpected mutation. This was the case with H1N1 (2009-2010), but the existence of teams on continuous alert on the subject made it possible to quickly hold a vaccine, and to vaccinate en masse. We know that mortality in Europe and the USA has been estimated excessively beforehand, which fuelled in 2010, and subsequently, suspicions of collusion between the WHO and the pharmaceutical industry to sell off an overproduction of vaccines.

Now, for the corona, it's a little bit the opposite. The structure of the corona viruses made it possible to envisage some common antigenic determinant (s) allowing the project of an anti-corona "pan vaccine". One of the best French specialists on this subject, Bruno Canard, deserves to be quoted at length: "We had just launched major structural genomics programs on viruses to try not to be caught off guard when it emerges. The approach is very simple: how to anticipate the behaviour of a virus that we do not know? Well, just by studying all the viruses known to have knowledge transferable to new viruses. A European project launched for this

purpose at the time was followed by other programs. The emergence of SARS-CoV in 2003 illustrated the relevance of this approach. This led us to describe a first crystallographic structure in 2004. […] I think that a lot of time was lost between 2003 and today to find medicines. By 2006, interest in SARS-CoV had disappeared; we didn't know if it was going to come back. We then had trouble funding our research. Europe has disengaged from these major anticipation projects in the name of taxpayer satisfaction. Now, when a virus emerges, researchers are asked to mobilize urgently and find a solution for the next day. Science does not work like that. It takes time and thought. […] I thought of all the ANR (National Research Agency) projects that I have written, and which have not been selected. I thought about this Franco-German ANR project, which had no negative criticism, but whose evaluation lasted so long that I was told to re-submit it a year later, and then I was finally refused for lack of funds." [3]

Do you mean that research projects on "pan-vaccines" existed and were not funded?

GC: Yes. First, it takes time to write projects and submit them so as not to survive only with meagre recurring projects. Then you have to wait, and, in France, the projects selected by the National Research Agency are only a fraction of the projects submitted, and it is the same thing at the European level.

In addition, these projects are most often submitted in response to "calls for tender" which correspond to "cutting-edge", "priority", fashionable or "liable to significant openings" subjects… We see here, and I will come back to it, the danger of public-private collusion…

Do you mean that French research establishments are no longer subsidized as "before"?

GC: Yes. When I started research I worked very well with only recurring state credits (normally renewed from year to year). Then there appeared, at the end of the 1970s, the "programmed thematic actions". But they represented "icing on the cake". The situation quickly deteriorated under Chirac, then Sarkozy and Hollande. First, recurring credits - excluding large instruments and spatial programs - have been systematically trimmed, despite promises to reach the level, defined by Europe, of 2 then 3% of GDP… Currently, an INSERM laboratory – which is favoured compared to CNRS - works only at 25-30% on recurring credits, 15 to 20% for CNRS. Then came "private" funding, which certainly already existed (ARC, LNFCC for cancer, legacy to Pasteur or Curie), but a new scale was given by Telethon and Sidaction. Then the famous ANR projects.

You seem very critical about research on "projects"…

GC: Let's be clear: never at the Wellcome Research Institute or at the NIH (Bethesda, near Washington, USA) or in the years 1973-1974 then 1980-1981 during my project as an "exchange fellow" then "visiting scientist"", nor on my return under Mitterrand and even Chirac at the beginning. I certainly had - as we still have - an annual "activity report" evaluation, and the lab was evaluated every four years, with the submission of a new project for renewal or closure. Research in response on projects changes everything. Excluding themes that cannot be abandoned (research on AIDS is an example), that gives a lot of programmatic definitions by technocrats. However, as the demonstrators said at the time of "Saving Research", under Fillon, "the light bulb was not invented by making programs on extending the life and improving the brightness of the candle." Then came false claims about rising budgets, and in parallel job cuts … and the advent of public-private partnerships.

Does the private sector play a role?

GC: For sure! Thank you Jospin, thank you Allègre (and also Geismar), and the research innovation law which makes it possible to create start-ups alongside its laboratory, but also the research tax credit, donation of billions of euros to the private sector without verified return, the Court of Audit also. In a certain number of cases, start-ups and large pharmaceutical companies become de facto co-directors of the public laboratory.

And the posts?

GC: There, absolute disaster: fewer jobs, development of casualization - very clear in biology but not only there -, hence the first demonstrations under Fillon, and the recent demonstration of laboratory collectives.

Macron has announced an increase in the research budget over 10 years.

GC: First, the budget is not even there, as highlighted in the press release from the National Union of Scientific Researchers (SNCS). Then, we are used to these announcements. As long as there is no vote on this in Parliament, I would remain more than sceptical. For me, what matters is the current situation which is almost catastrophic.

So, the virus?

GC: Well, we could probably have had a vaccine and/or treatment ready… But that's an investment in the future. Not always at a loss. Sometimes yes. It's like gene amplification machines (PCR, Polymerase Chain Reaction) to detect the virus. Having an apparently oversized number would in fact have enabled large-scale screening and a Korean strategy. So, well, as Bruno Canard says, researchers are going to be mobilized in emergency on a "crash program"… Too little, too late. And there again, with an eye from the private sector which, since the 1990s, has invested little in real research, but has reaped the profits. While we refused between 2009 and 2019 to invest in fundamental projects.

Research, like hospital infrastructure, is an investment in the future and the public, not a short run, just in time, with precarious staff, for immediate profits. A policy let's say it, and we see it in every crisis, which is criminal.

Footnotes

[1] CNRS : Conseil National de Recherche Scientifique (National Council for Scientific Resarch) and INSERM : Institut National de (National Institute of Health and Medical Research), France.

[2] In English Sonia Shah, *The Nation* 18 February 2020 "Think Exotic Animals Are to Blame for the Coronavirus? Think Again.", in French *Le Monde Diplomatique* 17 March 2020 "Contre les pandémies, l'écologie".

[3] *lemonde.fr*, 29 February 2020. "Face aux coronavirus, énormément de temps a été perdu pour trouver des médicaments".

Epidemics, working-class self-organization and socialism

29 March 2020, by Kay Mann

Sudden crises lay bare the great contradictions of class society and create both the necessity and the opportunity for the self-organization of daily life. More rarely, they lay the groundwork for revolutionary situations in which the question of Who rules society? is posed. As Lenin explained,

It is only when the "lower classes" do not want to live in the old way and the "upper classes" cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters). [1]

It is often some dramatic event like a sharp increase in food prices, as was the case in France in 1789, military defeat and the possibility of occupation, as in Paris in 1871, or the combined effects of the ravages of war and famine, as in Russia in 1917, that sparks political crises that lead to revolutionary situations. The state as a provider of basic services evaporates in more and more corners of social life, although certainly not as a repressive force.

During times of crisis, ordinary people often step up and provide the essential services that the state no longer provides. They draw on their creativity, occupational skills, work and community ties, and their unions and other organizations to create social structures of a profoundly democratic nature.

In revolutionary situations, popular councils, such as the soviets that arose in Russia in 1917, compete with the "official" government for power. This "dual power" is highly unstable and is resolved quickly in favor of one side or the other. Revolutions succeed when the insurgency represented by the new organs of popular power prevails. When the old regime prevails, counter-revolution ensues.

Workers Self-Organization

It doesn't take a full-blown revolutionary situation, however, to unleash the capacity of ordinary working people to self-organize. During mass and general strikes entailing the suspension of daily social services, workers themselves organize to assure the functioning of essential social services.

During the Seattle general strike of 1919, for example, workers organized the functioning of daily life. They formed a general strike committee that labor historian Jeremy Brecher called "a virtual counter government for the city." Food distribution was established, dairy drivers organized milk distribution, and recently demobilized soldiers who had fought in World War I organized a "Labor War Veteran's Guard" to assure public safety. [2]

During the mass strikes that took place in Oakland in 1946, in the context of the mass strike wave that occurred in the US after World War II, social services evaporated. Strikers and workers took control of the city and organized basic services. The following account gives a glimpse of both the ways workers organized daily life in the city for the duration of the strike and the atmosphere of joyful liberation that permeated the city.

By nightfall on the 3rd the strikers had instructed all stores except pharmacies and food markets to shut down, Bars were allowed to stay open, but they could serve only beer and had to put their juke boxes out on the sidewalk to play at full volume and no charge. 'Pistol Packin' Mama, Lay That Pistol Down', the number one hit, echoed off all the buildings. That first 24-hour period of the 54-hour strike had a carnival spirit. A mass of couples danced in the streets. The participants were making history, knew it, and were having fun. By Tuesday morning they had cordoned off the central city and were directing traffic. Anyone could leave, but only those with passports (union cards) could get in.

The comment made by a prominent national network newscaster, that 'Oakland is a ghost town tonight,' was a contribution to ignorance. Never before or since had Oakland been so alive and happy for the majority of the population. It was a town of law and order. In that city of over a quarter million, strangers passed each other on the street and did not have fear, but the opposite.

Experienced labor and socialist

organizers play outsized roles in these situations, providing leadership and promoting broad and democratic decision-making in mass forums.

It is unlikely that the current coronavirus crisis could lead to a total breakdown of public services, utilities and food distribution in the U.S. But disruptions of daily life and the very real possibility of outbreaks that temporarily overwhelm hospitals and health services, at least locally, could stimulate forms of popular self-organization, such as child care, food banks, transportation and clinics, as well as forums where public issues are discussed, debated and voted on. We are already seeing the beginning of this in the form of mutual aid efforts like those formed to organize shopping for elderly people and those with compromised immune systems.

The experience of ordinary working people stepping to the fore and running society can leave an indelible mark on mass consciousness. The powerful logic of collective solutions to social problems will challenge the deeply ingrained notions of bourgeois individualism, the bedrock of capital's cultural hegemony.

Ideas like nationalizations that seemed impossibly radical one day appear reasonable, possible, even essential the next. Trotsky noted that during the period of breakdown and revolution in Russia in 1917, mass working-class consciousness made huge leaps and bounds in a revolutionary direction in a remarkably short period.

As capitalist governments display their inability to handle deep crises in the interests of all, and workers organize to fill the breach, the genie gets out of the bottle. The "fantasy" of socialism based on truly popular democracy becomes an obvious possibility and even necessity to millions of people.

In the current situation, the contradictions and absurdities of a healthcare system only for some, and an economy that only works for the 1%, will become more evident in the eyes of larger and larger sections of the population. As sick people are denied healthcare, employers resist paying laid-off workers, and landlords demand rents, anti-capitalist measures such as forcing recalcitrant employers to pay wages, converting rental properties to housing coops, canceling debt, and nationalizing airlines, banks and other industries under worker and consumer control will find a broad echo.

Socially communicable epidemics like the coronavirus by nature pose a special challenge to mass democratic action. Mass action involving close physical contact, such as public demonstrations and picket lines, are of course out of the question for the moment. But the same global processes and technological that accelerate pandemics also provide means for virtual interaction, which can provide safe and highly democratic forums for debate and organization. As the pandemic recedes, traditional forms of self-organization will become available again.

The history of popular struggles is that of the creativity of the producers and the oppressed. As working people organize in the face of disaster, collective experiences like those we are beginning to see give glimpses of what socialism could be and the way to get there. In this way, a new and better world is being born within this rotten old one.

Source: 23 March 2020 Solidarity.

Footnotes

[1] V.I. Lenin Marxists.org "Left-Wing" Communism: an Infantile Disorder.

[2] See *Strike!*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014.

2,000 dead as coronavirus ravages France

28 March 2020, by Pierre Rousset

No Borders News:Describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Pierre Rousset: Comparing figures on the international level is very difficult. As of March 25 in France, there were 25,000 "confirmed" cases, but only those presenting serious symptons are tested here whereas testing is widespread in other countries. The government announced 1,331 deaths, but these are only deaths recorded in hospitals. The government still does not know the number who have died in retirement homes (EPHAD) or in their own homes. Official figures state that 11,539 people were hospitalized for coronavirus, of which 2,827 were in serious condition (3,900 were discharged after recovering).

It is very difficult to estimate the number people who have been infected. The Ministry of Health spoke of a range between 35,000 and 80,000, most likely a significant underestimation. The former Director of Public Health (our Surgeon General) suggested, with all due caution, a figure of 2 million.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

PR: The country was totally unprepared for the pandemic although the president and the government

have known since January that the epidemic would soon arrive. This lack of preparation stems from several sources. Some are old, some are new.

Genuine readiness would have meant maintaining strategic stocks of protective gear, detection tests, hydroalcoholic gel, intubation equipment, etc. And here we are referring to a specifically French tragedy because these strategic stocks once existed but they were destroyed. Regarding masks, in 2009 there were nearly a billion surgical masks (worn by patients to protect those around them) and 700 million FFP2 (N95) respiratory masks which protect healthy people from contamination. These state-managed stocks were distributed in 2013 to hospitals and businesses that were told to maintain them at their own expense without any financial support to do so. By January, there was no longer a single FFP2 (N95) mask in government stocks and only 130,000 million surgical masks. The result is that today, when we are weeks into the crisis, a large number of caregivers – particularly those directly exposed to contamination – do not have the masks they need, and pharmacies are not able to give them to people at risk because of their age or the state of their health.

Certain regions are suffering an extreme health emergency. For instance, in the Grand Est region, an evangelical religious sect brought together thousands of people for several days, leading to an explosion of Covid-19 in that region while contributing to the virus' dissemination in metropolitan France and to overseas territories. This was partiocularly irresponsible given the South Korean precedent (another evangelical sect meeting in Wuhan, China during the explosion of the epidemic returned secretly to Korea giving rise to an massive contagion).

President Emmanuel Macron's watchword has been to save money, that is, cut the budget everywhere and all the time over the last three years, cuts for which we are paying dearly today. The state must step aside, says Macron, so the "necessarily more efficient" market can take charge; hence, medical supply production was outsourced to China. As the health crisis ramped up, we found that everything was lacking and the industrial fabric capable of providing what we urgently needed had disintegrated.

The government had not grasped the depth of the problem until recently. Without stating it explicitly, Macron at first shaped his policy according to the concept of group immunity because, as one of his advisers admitted, they thought it was "a big flu". In January, the question arose of whether or not to proceed with municipal elections set for March 15. In fact, the government decided to hold the vote and thousands of liters of hydroalcoholic gel were wasted on this occasion by poll workers and voters, even though it is still difficult to find sanitizer in pharmacies. Further, the government's decision to hold the March 15 vote convinced the population that the situation was not very serious.

Then, starting in mid-March, Macron adopted increasingly severe measures: closure of elementary schools, high schools, and universities, calls to respect gestes barriers(physical and social distancing) and to limit movement under penalty of fines, decrees extending over the whole territory and no longer just in a few areas, etc.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

PR: The social safety net in France was one of the most developed in the Western world based on, in particular, reforms won by the labor movement in the aftermath of the Second World War. The founding principle of French social security is: "everyone contributes according to their means and is treated according to their needs." Heath care equality was never perfect, but it was a major achievement. An achievment undermined over many years by giving private insurance an ever increasing role, gradually making the cost of health a very heavy burden for the working classes. However, in France, a large portion of hospital care remains free for everyone.

The French health model has never been perfect, far from it, but the hospital system was one of the strongest in the world. Yet, for 30 years it has suffered continuous attacks in the name of accounting rigor, as if a hospital should be managed like a business! More than 50,000 beds have been eliminated, including in intensive care units where France ranks only nineteenth globally in the number of beds per inhabitant – France has 3.1 beds per person compared to Japan's 7.8.

Thus far, the hospital system has been able to cope with the rapidly increasing number of patients requiring intensive care, but it may be overwhelmed within a week or two. At that point, it will no longer be able to treat everyone.

In itself, Covid-19 is not a particularly deadly disease, the vast majority of cases are mild. If the health system (from general practitioners to hospitals) were prepared to cope with a pandemic, if detection tests and masks were available in large numbers, vulnerable people could be taken care of under proper conditions. On the other hand, Covid-19's threat is multiplied in a situation of shortage. There will be many preventable deaths, victims of the coronavirus, or other conditions that will not be properly treated because of the strain on the system. We are only at the beginning of this ordeal.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

PR: Given the situation, all political forces, including the far left, are demanding that everyone respect protective measures, from social distancing to confinement.

In order to silence its critics, the government and the president's party are appealing for national unity, denouncing any criticism in these times of emergency, all with the support of mainstream conservatives, the extreme right, the center-left parties of government, and the employers.

The radical left rejects this logic because it ends up endowing the presidency with extraordinary powers to surpress civil liberties. For example, the government has set aside provisions in the Labor Code by raising, among other things, limits on the work week to 60 hours as opposed to the previous limit of 48 hours. This is true even as employees are generally not garanteed healthy and safe working conditions that guard against the spread of coronavirus. The "go to work" compulsion overrides the call to "stay confined."

Companies are legally required to ensure the safety of their employees, but we know this is never the case even in normal times because employees are unable to enforce workplace compliance with regulations. The government had recently presented employers with a gift by reducing the powers of the Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee (CHSCT). In one sign of employer-friendly actions by the government prior to the crisis, the authorities "informed" businesses that surgical masks (which are less expensive) protected workers just as effectively as respiratory masks FFP2 (which are more expensive), this is patently false. When Macron says "work more," he is cynically contradicting the official doctrine of staying at home and this will only increase circulation of the virus owing to the lack of health protections.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

PR: To quote the terms of a union press release dated March 19, "Faced with this major health crisis," the trade union confederations (CFDT, CGT, FO, CFE-CGC, CFTC) and employers' organizations (MEDEF, CPME, U2P) affirmed, in a joint declaration, "the essential role of social dialogue and collective bargaining." [1]

So far, this has been the only important common "action" carried out by the workers' confederations. This statement caused a great deal of commotion amongst workers in a number of unions, notably the CGT, tradionally led by the Communist Party. In several cities and departments, the unions have published joint declarations for the protection of employees and the full payment of wages for part-time work stemming from reduced hours.

Meanwhile, the question of the struggle is being raised in local workplaces where workers are demanding the effective closure of non-essential activities, safety standards commensurate with health risks, and the extention of social welfare for all. For instance, Renault and Amazon employees walked out to shut down business and demand real protections.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

PR: Each social movement has mobilized on its own terrain – for the defense of immigrants or the homeless, to demand abortions are recognized as medical emergencies and not postponed indefinitely (which has been won) – and each specific movement has affirmed its solidarity with others.

Women appear to suffer somewhat lower medical risks from Covid-19 compared to men, however, they are more socially vulnerable because of the still unequal distribution of household chores and because the professions most directly exposed to coronavirus are predominantly female: healthworkers (obviously) but also cashiers in department and grocery stores, etc.

Therefore, the social movements are demonstrating particular solidarity with women. Lockdown considerably increases the risk of conjugal and omestic violnce and makes the indiesponsable solidarity with battered women much more difficult to put in place. [2]

Neighbors are offering solidarity with each other in their own apartment buildings and every evening at 8 p.m. people cheer from their windows to show support for our healthworkers.

In terms of local solidarity, we face a particular difficulty in France. The traditions of local "citizen" mobilization are much weaker with us than in countries like Italy. Unions are not used to acting outside the workplace, local unions have generally never been valued (compared to the national federations), nor have they received significant funding. We must organize local solidarity "from below," but it's difficult to start doing so under confinement!

Some social movements (not all…) are also preparing for what comes next by linking emergency programs to perspectives: ecological revolution, complete reform of health policy and social protection, nationalization and socialization of vital sectors (including finance), etc. The hope is that the ordeal we are all going through today is not in vain, but will act as a springboard for the struggles of tomorrow!

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

PR: Rightly, all these efforts should be part of the nation's first response.

The authorities know this and are trying to respond rhetorically, without changing any of their priorities. Thus, Macron declared that limitless funds will be available to face the crisis, to guarantee the maintenance of wages and incomes, and, in particular, to provide workers with 84 percent of their net salary in the event of reduced employment, including 100 percent of salaries for those who earn the minimum wage. Also, the European Union has itself suspended (self-imposed) balanced-budget rules imposed on member states.

However, when any member of the government attempts to intervene, a cacophony arises. Who is really empowered to do what? When, in fact, administrative and departmental authorities (such as social security administrators or regional secretaries, etc.) accept or reject social welfare measures in response to the crisis, what will ultimately remain of presidential promises?

The government is ostensibly acting through the banks (the state endowed them with 300 billion euros) and big businesses are postponing layoffs so that they do not lose their skilled workforce. Thus, managing the economy is central to the logic of power, much more so than guaranteeing social and civil rights, and this fact has far-reaching implications.

Finally, Macron took advantage of the crisis to present himself as a warlord and to praise the role of the French military in mainland France as well as in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. He sees the crisis as an opportunity to continue his militarist policies. [3]

NBN: How will the Covid-19 crisis impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

PR: The health crisis reveals the weakness of France's industrial fabric and the absence of a clear industrial policy. [4] This is doubly damaging. The French pharmaceutical industry bosses are powerful, but production is outsourced overseas.

Historically, the French bourgeoisie had a very strong leadership tradition. Under the classic Gaullist regime, the state was intended to drive economic development in coordination with the private sector and, on occasion, even with the army (energy and arms sectors, civilian and military nuclear, etc.). We even had five-year plans, although the were certainly different from the Soviet plans.

Compared to others, the French bourgeoisie did not convert itself to neoliberal dictates until relatively late, but when it did, the bosses and the state made a radical turn, which explains the extent and speed of deindustrialization.

Thus, faced with the coronavirus, Asian countries like South Korea and Japan look on our desperate lack of means with dismay. We are utterly dependent on international markets to obtain simple masks! How can the fifth or sixth most powerful economy in the world be so destitute?

The European Union's helplessness in times of crisis is also glaring. It has been unable to act in solidarity with Italy, which has been hit hard and has no mask production at all on its own soil. Aid arrived from China, Russia, Cuba, but not from the European Union. Health policies are not part of the prerogatives of the EU. This is pathetic and this failure will not be without consequences.

The Covid-19 epidemic is a concentration of several crisises. The global model of capitalist development will now face sharper questions than ever before. The power of the current pandemic was born and bread by globalization, social insecurity, the disintegration of public powers and policies, ecological crisis, and the neoliberal order.

And, there is no longer any room for doubt that the eco-socialist alternative is *truly* a vital necessity.

*Source **No Borders News**. This version has been slightly expanded following the French version published on ESSF which also contains more references.*

Footnotes

[1] See *Déclaration commune*.

[2] The government has introduced a system of alerts for women through the pharmacies which remain open. *Le Monde*, 28 March 2020 "Confinement : les violences conjugales en hausse, un dispositif d'alerte mis en place dans les pharmacies".

[3] AP News, 3 December 2019 "The Latest: Macron wants bigger Europe military role in NATO".

[4] *Atlantico*, 18 March 2020 "Pénurie de respirateurs et de masques : est-il vraiment si difficile de mettre en œuvre une politique industrielle en soutien de notre santé ? Partie I", and 21 March 2020 "Pénurie de respirateurs, de masques et de tests : suite".

Ireland nationalizes hospitals – "It can be done"

28 March 2020, by Eamonn McCann

Eamonn McCann was a leading member of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland politician in the 1970s. He is a journalist and author of several books, including War in an Irish Town. In the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election, he was elected as an MLA for the Foyle constituency in Derry on the People Before Profit ticket. Originally published in Rebel in Ireland, republished with permission by No Borders News as part of our ongoing international coronavirus coverage.

One of the most perplexing aspects of the pandemic lies in the apparent inability of the manufacturing industry in the most sophisticated economies ever known to humankind to switch decisively away from making and delivering stuff we don't need towards provision and distribution of ventilators, surgical masks, ICU equipment, test kits etc.

Instead of the car industry shutting down because of the stock market crash and collapse of supply lines, factories could be re-tooled and the 171,000 skilled workers transferred and speedily re-trained for far more urgently-needed products.

The most technologically advanced sector of car manufacture in the UK is

focused on motorsports. It employs 38,000 workers. Why isn't this substantial bank of engineering and electronic skills being put to immediate constructive use?

We know that a transformation on this scale could be done, and done quickly, because it's been done before.

One difference on that occasion was that it was the means of waging war the ruling class urgently wanted, not equipment for the preservation of life.

Japanese airplanes bombed Pearl Harbour on December 7th, 1941. By Xmas, the US economy had been put on a radically different footing.

"It is not enough to turn out just a few more planes, a few more tanks, a few more guns, a few more ships than can be turned out by our enemies," President F.D. Roosevelt told the country in a radio broadcast on December 10th. "We must out-produce them overwhelmingly, so that there can be no question of our ability to provide a crushing superiority of equipment in any theatre of the world war."

In 1939, the United States army ranked 39th in the world in terms of military power. The country had not been involved in major conflict since the end of World War One. Its dominant ideology anathematised foreign intervention.
Now, suddenly, the president was setting staggering targets and a giddy change of direction for military production. He dispatched a flurry of orders to owners of industry, trades union leaders, newspaper editors, party bosses, state legislators, etc. – your country needs you to stop what you are doing and join in a mighty effort to equip America to prevail in a global conflict.

The US went on to produce 60,000 aircraft in 1942, 125,000 in 1943, plus 120,000 tanks and 55,000 anti-aircraft guns in the same period – and trained a vast force to use them.

Industries were not asked or urged to meet these targets, but directly instructed. Managers and workers were effectively conscripted.

Roosevelt decreed that all car manufacture was to cease "right now." In 1941, the US manufactured more than three million cars. Between Roosevelt's speech and the end of the war in 1945, 139 rolled off the production lines. (Not a misprint: 139.)

General Motors was told to switch immediately to making airplane engines, guns, trucks and tanks. Chrysler was to specialise in fuselages. Ford began frantic re-tooling. The average Ford car, the Model T, had some 15,000 parts. The airplane Ford was now instructed to make – the B-24 long-range bomber – had 1,550,000. By mid-1942, six months after Roosevelt's speech, B-24s were trundling off the line at a pace of one every 63 minutes.

It can be done.

Shipyards turned out vessels at such a rate that by the autumn of 1943 all Allied shipping sunk since 1939 – US, British, Australian etc. – had been replaced. In 1944, the United States built more planes than the Japanese managed to do during the entire course of the war.

By the end of the war, more than half of all industrial production in the world was taking place in the US and around 80 percent of this was war production.

America was transformed at a pace and to an extent which would have been dismissed just months previously as beyond the range of possibility. It was this, more than any other factor, which was to win the war – the production of what was needed for victory in the quantities and the time required.

It was this which set the US on the road to becoming the world's super-power.

As many as 16 million men and women were recruited, trained and shipped off to war. Half as many again, 24 million, poured into the defence industries back home – many earning more than they would previously have dared ask for.

Eighteen million women entered the workforce. African Americans and Latinos were brought in for the first time. Union officials policed production.

At the beginning of the war, Gulf Shipbuilding employed 240 men. By 1943, the number had risen to 11,600. The Alabama Dry Dock company went from 1,000 workers to 30,000 in 14 months. In Connecticut, the medium-sized Mattatuck Manufacturing Company switched overnight from making upholstery nails for furniture to cartridge clips for Springfield rifles – three million a week.

The American Brass Company, known for plumbing parts and decorative devices, began producing brass rods and tubes for weapons. The Chase Brass and Copper Company made more than 50 million cartridge cases and mortar shells and more than a billion bullets.

And so on. Patterns of production changed out of all recognition. It can be done.

A union official in Alabama recalled factories clanking and whirring around the clock. "For the workers, it was seven days a week, 12-hour days, 10 hours on Saturday, eight hours on Sunday, on and on, in and out, over and over and over and over again.

"The one thing was to produce material to win the war."

The economy boomed to dizzying heights. The Depression disappeared in the slipstream of rocketing manufacture. The US was to end the war as the most powerful economic and military force in the world, and with a society different in dozens of ways.

The massive movement of African Americans from the South into Northern industrial centres like Chicago and Detroit generated a cultural as well as an economic shift. New sounds eddied out. It was thus that Motown was born.

Capitalist society had changed but had not been overthrown. Some things stayed the same. Jim Crow still skulked. Women remained oppressed. The gulf between the rich and the rest yawned wide. But many of the changes which happened were to prove irreversible. Things hadn't quite

returned to normal. “Normal” was gone.

It wasn’t that everything changed for the better but that everything changed, some of which was for the better and which we managed to retain.

What had generated this altered state was that the imminence of an existential threat had smashed into the consciousness of a relatively enlightened leadership of the US ruling class which responded as rapidly and appropriately as capitalist thinking allowed.

This is not an exact model for moving forward now. But it has lessons for now which it’s useful to think on.

Can we match the soaring leap in production of armoured cars and ships and ‘planes under Roosevelt with a hike the likes of which has never been witnessed in production of ventilators, masks, protective clothing, testing units and whatever else the NHS tells us we need?

Can we switch en masse into new areas of manufacture appropriate to the scarifying age we live in?

Can we create comprehensive high-quality, home-based education system for now and for future generations?

Can this generation mimic or even outdo the shift in attitudes and assumptions in the US in the 1940s?

Yes, we can. It can be done.

Who will argue now that the future of our society, even of our civilisation, is contingent on ceding power to a super-clever elite rather than on the sweat and genius of the working class?

What class of people would now dare deny a nurse’s pay claim? Or insist that our public services must give way to private enterprise, that need must wait on greed, the market let rip through every aspect of our lives?

In face of the coronavirus pandemic, eternal orthodoxies have become old hat.

Ideology has been twisted back into shape.

However things work out in the coming days, weeks, months, years, struggle will continue at ever deeper levels. It is through the experience of struggle that we will shape the world anew. The defenders of the old order haven’t gone away, but have hunkered down to wait for their hour to come again.

If we steady ourselves, keep focus on the obdurate truths of class conflict, evident through the fog of fear and confusion in and around us, we will better see the outline of the terrain on which we will have to fight.

We will have socialism or barbarism, Rosa Luxemburg warned. Her truth has never loomed so large.

*Source: 27 March **No Borders News**. Originally published in Rebel in Ireland.*

Covid-19 opens up a new political period in Italy

27 March 2020, by Antonello Zecca

No Borders News: Briefly describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Antonello Zecca: Italy has been hit severely by the new Coronavirus. The virus has been spreading all over the country with the number of overall cases reaching 53,578 on March 21. And these numbers are set to grow. The worst affected area is Lombard (the nation’s most industrialized region) with 25,515 reported cases, followed by Emilia-Romagna (6,705), Veneto (4,617) and Piedmont (3,752). All these areas are located in North Italy. Although reported cases are at a much lower figures in the other parts of the country, no one should underestimate the impact Covid-19 is having, and will keep having in the coming weeks, including in those areas that are currently spared a mass contagion. Experts differ about how fast the contagion will spread in the coming weeks. As a matter of fact, no one can predict how long will it last and when peak will be reached, as defined by two or three consecutive days of decreasing infection rates. To date, however, there are 4,825 dead, with some 50% of those in Lombardy.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

AZ: The Italian government did not respond as swiftly and as effectively as it should have to this health crisis. It closed airports to all flights coming from China after the outbreak, but it did not do the same for connecting flights. Instead, it should have stayed open to flights coming from China but instituted checks for all passengers for any signs of the infection to then put them on precautionary quarantine. When the first case was officially reported in Italy, the government did nothing responsible to stop people from panicking. And a few days later, the national government joined together with local councils and politicians from all over the political spectrum sponsored ads claiming that Lombardy, — Italy’s economic capital

and most important financial center — was "running normally," thereby contributing to people underestimating the threat. After the surge in cases, the government took harsh measures by putting Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna on lockdown and, finally, on March 9, declared the whole country on lockdown. Among the main measures the government has taken thus far are to prohibit public gatherings, close schools and colleges, order pubs and bars to close a 6 pm, shut down big shopping malls, severely restrict the number of people allowed at supermarkets at any one time, and promote social distancing. The Ministry of Health has even taken harsher measures such as imposing severe restrictions of outdoor physical exercise, even individuals exercising by themselves, and the closing bars and restaurants located at airports and train stations. And yesterday the government took the much-anticipated decision to shut down all non-essential economic sectors.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

AZ: Our health care system was ravaged by a decade of funding and provision cuts, leaving it a shadow of its former self. 37 billion euros were cut and more than 70,000 beds vanished into thin air. ICU beds amount today to just 5,090, while the Ministry of Health states 2,500 more ICU beds are needed to tackle the crisis. The beds to population ratio is currently 3.6/1000, down from 5.8/1000 in 1998. The number of available healthcare professionals was not even sufficient to respond to the needs of an ageing population in ordinary times and has buckled under the stress of the Covid19 outbreak. Last but not least here, as neoliberal cuts were being implemented, the system was increasingly fragmented into regional management, breaking up state management and hampering national funding system. This resulted in economically stronger areas getting more resources while weaker areas fell behind. Worse, in recent years, public financial support has flowed into a growing private health care system. Thus, the Italian healthcare system was not well equipped to respond to the crisis when it hit. Even after all this, the Italian health system's greatest strength lies in still being a single-payer system as well as its dedicated and terrific professionals who, despite being constantly neglected by successive governments, have demonstrated the greatest humanity, discipline, and sense of self-sacrifice for the common good.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

AZ: The crisis led to some initial confusion in the political mainstream. It hit like a tsunami and put this mainstream to test. The current Italian government is an alliance between the center-left Democratic Party and the center-right populist Five Star Movement, which has been handling the emergency since it started. The governing parties' response has centered around appealing to people's sense of responsibility. They were later compelled to take hasher and harsher measure to try and stop the spread of the disease, but they always stopped short of enforcing these as they relied on people upholding them on their own, which has mainly happened so far. These measures were undoubtedly necessary to stop the epidemic to reach catastrophic proportions.

However, a criminal flaw in government's strategy was giving in to pressure from Confindustria (Italy's Chamber of Commerce) that all factories and plants should be kept running, even non-essential ones, like food production, distribution and sales, and pharmaceuticals not directly involved in meeting emergency needs. Especially in the worst hit areas, which are also the most industrialized, this amounts to committing mass murder since as many as 300,000 workers commute every day to workplaces and back, helping to spread the infection among the population while infecting their own families as well.

Right, conservative, and far-right parties, while in the first place trying to reassure the general public that everything was going well, too, recently adopted a much more aggressive stance and started demanding that all non-essential factories and plants be shut down until the crisis was over. They understand how they can take advantage of the situation by promoting a demand in tune with the sentiment of millions, thereby placing themselves as the frontrunners in next political period. However, they have also promised the bosses' association that they will put forward an aggressive pro-employer agenda for lower taxes, including something akin to a flat tax system. As of today, the government finally decided to shutdown non-essential factories and plants in consultation with the bosses' association and trade unions' representatives, but until the decree is published, there will still certainly be a struggle about which sectors are to be considered essential and which are not.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

AZ: They have generally not lived up to the expectations that they would do anything to defend and protect workers' lives, health, working conditions, and wages. They did not demand that non-essential factories and plants, especially in the worst hit areas, should be closed until the crisis was over and only started to react as workers in many plants from the North to the South of the country started to go on strike spontaneously for their own health and safety. Next, the big trade unions (not the grassroots ones, which were never invited to any table and have kept up the struggle from the very onset of the crisis) sat around a table with the bosses' association and the government and signed an agreement intended to ensure safe working conditions for all workers.

However, it is important to understand that Italian industrial is mainly comprised of small-sized companies (95%), which have weak unions, if they have unions at all, and whose working conditions are under

the absolute control of the bosses. Besides, even in the biggest factories and plants, it is not only objectively impossible to abide by the safety measures mandated in the national agreement (for instance, maintaining at least one meter's distancing) but workers are often not even provided with any protective masks whatsoever, or have to wear the same one for days on end. What's worst, the unions went as far as to accept a one-time bonus of (gross) 100 euros to be handed out to all workers who showed up at work! Now they are trying to make up for participating in this crime by asking the government to shut it all down, which has finally happened, but only after the damage was done and workers' anger had been boiling over for days on end.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

AZ: Since we are on lockdown, no mass gatherings are allowed and no meetings are possible, but locally on-line meetings are being organized to try and respond to the crisis the best they can. The main goal now is to help the most disadvantaged, disabled, and destitute with their daily needs (shopping above all). So, the movements, each according to their actual capabilities in a time of great distress, will try to organize the provision some social services to these people. Many are also trying to use social media for the purpose of disseminating an alternative narrative framework, launching online campaigns, etc.

NBN: Are there any efforts to make demands for social justice, national health care, emergency economic measures for unemployment pay, stopping rent and debt payments, etc.?

AZ: In this regard, there are efforts being made by the Left, though these are still too fragmented and, are as of now, incapable of playing a substantive political role. Unfortunately, the Left is not yet able to take advantage of the fissures this tragedy has opened up to put forward demands that not only to tackle the emergency but, going forward, put the itself in a better position to fight back against the capitalists, who will certainly try to make the working class shoulder the burden of the post-Covid19 crisis, in the context of a recession that will hit the global economy hard in general, and hit even harder in a country like Italy.

In any event, the main demands from the broader Left are: adequate income guarantees for all workers who are out of work due to the emergency; income tax on the wealthy; full and complete socialization of public healthcare system; private health care system to fund itself entirely on its own without any contributions from the state; requisition without indemnity of private healthcare infrastructures to help tackle the emergency. The government has taken some measures that were likewise demanded by the Left and social movements such as suspending rent payments, a subsidy for the self-employed, and a two-month prohibition of layoffs in sectors closed by the Covid19 epidemic. However, the Left and social movements have also called for a generalization of these measures, whose scope still does not cover hundreds of thousands of people, especially those in the informal sector which is especially large in the South of the country.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

AZ: Without exaggeration, one can say that this changes everything. Nothing will be as it used to be before the outbreak. Many people will crave to return to the old normal. However, the economic recession, whose scope will only be exacerbated by the Codid-19 outbreak and will continue after the health emergency has subdued, will prove that longing to be an impossibility. In all likelihood, the gap between the desire of millions of people to return to their previous lives and the objective circumstances preventing that from happen, will open a new political space, especially since the ruling class will try to impose even harsher sacrifices on working-class and common people alike. Unemployment will surge, austerity may be back on the saddle again, and the national debt as a percentage of the GDP will soar because of public emergency expenditures will be financed by new debts instead of taxing the rich, the corporations, and the biggest companies. And when all is said and done, the governing parties will demand that these debts be paid by the working people.

What's more, the crisis of the EU projectwill loom large over all this.

National politics is being badly shaken as this new political space unfolds, and there is more to come. Governing coalitions will be made and re-made, establishment parties will have to grapple with a radically different political landscape, and new political actors will emerge, for instance, centrist Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's popularity appears to be on the rise given the general perception of his handling of the crisis. At the moment, the center-left Democratic Party, the major partner in the governing coalition, appears to have been somewhat strengthened by this ordeal while, on the other side of the mainstream political spectrum, far-right leader Matteo Salvini's Leagueparty will probably come out rather weakened. However, the League continues hovering dangerously around 27% in national polls, while the other party of the Right — the far-rightist Fratelli d'Italia(Italia's Brothers) — keeps going up in the polls (now at about 15%) because a more-or-less wide layer of the petit bourgeoisie (along with some segment of the popular classes) perceives it to be defending the "common people" against finance and big business.

For the Left, the Covid-19 disaster opens up an altogether new period. The recession will usher in big risks, but it will also bring about proportionally big opportunities. We are at a crossroads. If we eventually manage to match objective conditions — under which "the people can no longer live in the old wayand the ruling class can no longer rule in the old way" — with our subjective ability to unite, organize, and put forward political and social demands that resonate with the masses' deepest

feelings, and if we are capable of thinking and acting strategically, we will be able to make the most of a time fraught with grave dangers, but equally ripe for enormous change.

22 March 2020

*Source: **No Borders News**.*

Right to strike “confined” in France

27 March 2020, by Solidaires

It seems very strange to us to continue to do customer service for companies like Lidl. The absolute need for the country to continue and have thousands of employees moving about for this type of activity remains an enigma for our union. Some companies offer telework, but it remains very underdeveloped despite the emergency. Major contractors, although with public capital, such as EDF, ENGIE (a billing service) reject its implementation for security reasons. Commercial security obviously takes precedence over public safety.

Hello corona?

In Belfort (Burgundy-Franche-Comté region), where this pandemic is very widespread, cases of coronavirus have been diagnosed all over the town. Our union asked for the maximum site security of in order to preserve the health of employees. It seemed all the more important since some of them precisely work for the green (state) information number on COVID-19.

For our union, telework should have been imposed by management from the start, respecting all of the recommendations, or even strengthening them given the situation in the region. The reality of this centre of the world number one in the sector, Teleperformance [a transnational considered as world leader in multi-channel management of the outsourced customer experience, with its head office in Paris] is quite different since from the start our union team had to force through everything: reduction in the number of teleoperators per room, the availability of hydroalcoholic gel, more regular disinfection of work equipment and compliance with safety distances both in break spaces and in production spaces. At the moment, we don’t have protective gloves, and no masks to move around and work. Even the possibility of working on a fixed station was only given last Wednesday, after the walkout. Worse, the management and the debriefing of listening was done without the appropriate distances

To obtain this advance, our union had to call a walkout of the employees last Wednesday (March 18) and trigger a right of information. So far we can say that all of this remains fairly common at the moment in view of the danger posed by employers to thousands of employees.

Police everywhere, health nowhere!

The management of Teleperformance, instead of meeting us to find a quick solution and to secure the situation, preferred to call the police to stop the walkout. The police have chosen to obey the management and ban the right to strike in the company by escorting the employees into work...

The police explain this choice to go against the right to strike by claiming that the rally was unauthorized and dangerous. However, as videos show, the employees had greater distances between them than on the production site. It seems obvious that there is a contradiction between the fact of prohibiting a gathering of more than 10 people outside, while we allow a grouping in a confined space of more than 50 people inside.

While our alerts were not heeded by management and state officials, our fears turned out to be true, as a case was announced the following day. It is likely that this person in the course of his duties was regularly in contact with several employees, including at their workstation. The site had to be closed for a major cleaning on Thursday morning (March 19) and will no doubt be reopened tomorrow.

What will the police say now? We reaffirm more than ever that our lives are worth more than their profits!

24 March 2020

Mercedes Benz: peoples’ lives are worth more than profits

27 March 2020, by Dani Ramos

This example from Mercedes highlights four points. First of all, one of the criminal weaknesses of the state of emergency decreed by the government is that, on the one hand, it imposes total lockdown on the people but on the other, allows companies which are not indispensable (such as ensuring nutrition and medical care or

health and cleaning work, etc.) to carry on with normal working where workers are not protected. Secondly, we see the irresponsibility of the health systems (central and regional) for not carrying out systematic tests on the population (as in South Korea) to detect the sources of the crisis and to be able to establish effective barriers against its propagation. Thirdly, the despotism of the company which, in a territory of special risk, such as Vitoria-Gasteiz, wanted to continue as if the epidemic was not going to affect them, when by that date -in France, for example- Renault had already closed its three factories. Fourthly, there is the need to get out of the paralysis-confinement in which the unions are stuck. They are the big absentees in this crisis that affects 99% of the people.

The crisis is serious and there is still possible to make up for lost time. The government and employers are still digging their heels in: they want to tackle the Covid-19 crisis without questioning the fundamental elements of the neoliberal policies promoted so far, and by limiting their alternative to a depletion of health workers and the increasingly harsh application of containment measures in a dynamic of militarization of society. It is up to the social and political left to start putting forward alternatives to this catastrophe by responding to people's concerns and putting pressure on institutions and governments for a radical change in their policies].

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After the events of Monday 16 March at the Mercedes factory in Vitoria, which led to the stoppage of production, I am writing this article with a lower heartbeat and a calmer state of mind.

I must begin by explaining that, since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis the feeling of vertigo I have had has been similar to what has happened in society, as a result of the events that have led me, from not giving excessive importance to the issue of the coronavirus, to seeing myself confined to my home in application of the State of Health Alarm established by royal decree of the Spanish State Government on Saturday 14 March, with immediate application from Sunday 15.

Chronology of the crisis at Mercedes Benz

I will now focus on how the events at the Mercedes factory unfolded. From the first days of the COVID-19 alert, the company referred us to the Occupational Risks Committee (ORP). It organized a series of regular meetings (Monday, Wednesday and Friday of each week), to follow up on possible cases, actions to be taken and to collect suggestions from the workforce on the subject. In those first days, the first isolated cases in society were known and "close contacts" (the official name given by the Basque health service, Osakidetza, to people who have had a direct relationship with positive cases of COVID-19) were discovered in the factory. The company has always said it would follow Osakidetza's instructions to the letter, so in those first cases, it sent the people who had been positive home. Meanwhile, it took other kinds of measures, mainly focused on the issue of hygiene: it provided hand disinfectant dispensers, and we know that it reinforced the cleaning contract to keep common areas, assembly lines, when not in production, and changing rooms clean. And so the days went by. Until March 5th.

For the ESK union section, all the alarms went off on that day. That Thursday the first positive COVID-19 was confirmed in the factory. It was a worker on the morning shift who had not been at work since Tuesday because she was showing symptoms and was waiting for the test result. It so happens that this worker, during that week, was taking one of the famous courses, outside working hours, for professional upgrading, so she was in contact with many more people who also work at Mercedes. Mercedes' response was not to send her colleagues home as a preventive quarantine measure. Nor did it communicate the positive result until the last hour of Friday, March 6, and it was limited to delivering the document of Osakidetza's recommendations (to keep a kind of quarantine, including, taking the temperature, not socializing, not traveling, etc.). The company made those, who belonged to the same working group and those who were doing the course with the affected one, sign. As it was the morning shift, in our opinion, the company was trying to save time since that shift did not start again until Monday at 10 pm. It also told them that if they found themselves without symptoms they should go to work.

From then on, in the week of the 9th to the 13th, there was an incessant dropping out of people all over the factory who were showing symptoms. But, in relation to the positive outbreak, 3 people from the same work area and 2 others who were taking the course were sent home for presenting symptoms. The 2 people in the course (I spoke to them personally on Wednesday 11) are still on leave today with mild symptoms, but it does not look like they will be tested.

On Monday 9th the schools in Vitoria closed. The PRL meetingwas brought forward to Tuesday 10th and the company informed us that the alternative of teleworking will be facilitated and that people will have some flexibility to attend to their family situation as long as the factory sector where they work can allow it. Obviously, this notification from the management was not effective and was only public relations, since, in a 3 shift assembly line process, this flexibility is impossible. The COVID-19 follows its unstoppable path and events follow one another in society creating more fear and at the same time more awareness all over the world. Before the restrictions were imposed, the company was already warned that with assembly processes it is impossible to guarantee 1.5 metres between people and that no disinfection is taking place on the tools that workers share. Not to mention the overcrowding of people in specific places and at specific times, changing rooms, rest areas, vending machines, entrances, exits, travelling by bus and sharing cars. Disinfectant substances are used up in the vending machines and the sum of everything that happens in the factory and in society becomes larger, causing a very

personalised feeling of health risk. Fear and anger were increasing.

On Friday 13th, the Works Committee demanded the closure of the plant because the safety measures were not guaranteed and, furthermore, there was no single criterion being applied in the sectors regarding these measures. The company did not intend to stop under any circumstances and urged us to open a negotiations to discuss an ERTE. This is an approach without any logic that consists in stopping specific areas and shifts in the factory as parts or people are missing. Although ESK considered that a decision had to be taken now, the day ends up with a decision left pending to be resolved on Monday.

But, the cascade of events accelerated and at the weekend we ended up in a state of emergency. The weekend turns into absolute telephone madness in which the fear and indignation of the people increases. It would be impossible for me to sum up here everything that happened over the weekend and the accuracy of the torrent of facts and emotions that occurred until Monday 16.

On Monday, the PRL department gave a series of instructions to the deparments to move them to the assembly lines. Respect the 1.5 m separation, with waits in places that coincide with the stopped line, if necessary, and deliver masks for work that is done in pairs. The Committee members started to go through the lines and we see that the fear, anger and indignation are palpable. There are even those who blame us for not directing the efforts of the committee to not go to work. We soon see that the intention of the managers themselves is to scrupulously comply with the PRL's slogans, which means continuous stops in production. The work is sporadically accompanied by whistles, pots and pans and spontaneous horns, without any instructions from the workers. At the beginning we have moments of mistrust and tension with some managers, but we soon agreed that the intention is the same. In order not to betray the truth, we have to tell people that they must remain separated when production is stopped, which means not forming "groups". That's how we spent the first hour. At 7:00 a.m. we went to the PRL, where they were handing out masks and we told them that they were not complying with the provisions of the royal decree of the State of Sanitary Alarms, which requires the handing out of masks to the public health service. In addition, we tell them that the 1.5 metre separation distance is not being complied with, that the masks are not suitable to avoid contagion, that they are being delivered without protocol or instructions for use, that the machines are not being disinfected when they are rotated, etc., etc. In short, everything is a real disaster. Later we found out that Mercedes had 4,000 masks and that they gave out 3,200 to the morning shift.

It was clear that the production was not going to be like a normal day but we didn't consider it enough since it also seemed clear that they were not going to send us home. Among the ESK colleagues we started talking about the possibility of having a sit-in at the end of line 10, the last assembly line. For this we contacted the union's advisor and discussed it with the other union sections. As the morning progressed, more union representatives from other unions and company representatives arrived. The PRL office became the epicenter of the situation. A representative of the committee decided to call the Ertzaintza to denounce the safety measures and the failure to deliver the masks to the Public Health Service. The non-compliance with safety regulations is reported to PRL and, as the company representatives arrived, we demanded that they stop as soon as possible and that they bring forward the 10:30 meeting. They all referred up to the director of the Mercedes Gasteiz plant, Titos.

Mr. Titos appeared shortly before 8:00 in the morning and made an appointment for 9 or 9:30. The ESK people decided to go back to the lines to be with the people and keep trying to get production stopped as much as possible. We received the recommendations of the consultancy and decided not to hold the sit-in alone, which we would only do with the extensive participation of the works committee.

At 9 we are informed that the meeting will take place at 9:30. At that time we attended the meeting. The company called asking to delay it by 15 or 30 minutes and that's when it all kicked off.

We started to protest and proposed to go to line 10 to stop production and wait there to be called. Surprisingly, it is easier than we thought and unanimously we went to all the union sections to carry out the sit-in. We stood there and stopped production. What happened from then on had 2 developments and 2 scenarios.

First of all, there is the scenario of line 10 itself. Spontaneously there was applause, cheering and thanks. At 10 o'clock, the time of the mid morning break, it becomes the meeting place of the south hall of final assembly. Hundreds of Mercedes workers join in, as well as those hired on sub contracts

Secondly, there is the meeting with the company, which finally took place. Director Titos did not give in, said that he would not stop the plant for the moment, but that his intention was to stop, but gradually from the afternoon. That the production in the morning shift should continue normally and that in the afternoon shift only the necessary staff will work and stop little by little. The serious thing is that he made the decision because he did not have enough masks for the afternoon shift. We continued to insist that work is stopped immediately and it should be easier for people to go home. He accused us of talking from an emotional standpoint and of sabotage. We met with reproaches, accusations, but we didn't get anywhere. The Ertzaintza arrived, but tells us that they can do nothing but pick up the complaint (about Mercedes not giving up its masks to the health service). The Ertzaintza refused to requisition the 800 masks that the company still retains. We meet with the company for another meeting at 12:30 and the Committee decidesd to keep the sit-in going.

At the sit-in, the chairman of the Committee addressed the assembly to inform them of what the company intended and that we did not accept it. We asked people to return to their

jobs at the orders of the management and leave the responsibility for what happened to the committee.

At 11:30 we have a technical meeting with those responsible for the sectors on the basis of not resuming production. In that meeting we agreed on the way to collect and send people home without any crowding. Finally, shortly before 1pm, the last workers left the factory.

At 12:30, Titos, disillusioned, threatened to take the necessary measures against the people who carried out the sit-in and decided that after what happened there is nothing to talk about and suspended the meeting.

On the afternoon of Tuesday 17, the Committee agreed to a request for a meeting on Wednesday 18, but the company said it would not be able to meet until Friday 20 at 10:30.

Interestingly, with the staff at home, calls from medical services to groups of workers who may have been exposed to the virus are growing. In addition, on the afternoon of Wednesday 18, the PRL already spoke of 4 confirmed positives and 154 people with symptoms who have not been tested.

Conclusion

The explanation for why at Mercedes we have reached a radical decision is obvious: the famous line 10 is not just any line: it is the line where the finished vehicle leaves, the last one; stopping it, sooner or later, all of them stop and, therefore, all vehicle production is stopped. The sole responsibility lies with the company, which has not shown the slightest empathy with the staff, nor our feelings. It had not understood that working people felt intensely that the company's attitude reflected the notion that producing vans was a priority over people's health.

As far as union work is concerned, at ESK we took the problem very seriously from the beginning, although the process of spreading this awareness to the entire workforce took time in the face of the company's position that it always followed Osakidetza's health recommendations. From ESK we questioned these explanations, especially after the positive one of March 5, but the company dug its heels in. It can be assumed that they were waiting for economic measures to be taken, but events have overtaken them. Our opinion is that Mercedes was looking to continue working at full capacity so that the stoppage would be due to a shortage of supplies and so that the contractors or suppliers would be responsible for the production stoppage or even cause absenteeism due to casualties or quarantines (absenteeism had shot up in recent weeks), which would have led to the stoppage and would have been eligible for some kind of economic benefit . In any case, the health of its workers, its contractors and their families, was obviously not its priority.

Most importantly, the action on the 16th brought relief to the workers on the staff and to the contractors. You could see the fear, the tension, the misunderstanding; and then the joy and the gratitude. In the company's conflict, director Titos said that we spoke from an emotional point of view and, in fact, he was right: of course our motivation wasemotional. But how could it not be so: we are talking about people's health, about their lives, a principle that cannot be renounced for a serious trade unionism . Well, on Monday 16 we contributed as never before to put people's lives at the centre of our trade union action.

20 March 2020

Dani Ramos, member of the Works Council of Mercedes Benz for the ESK union

South African union demands action on Covid-19

26 March 2020, by Andrew Chirwa

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) is disappointed that to date our government has not proposed enough measures to cushion the working class and the poor against the negative effects of the coronavirus outbreak. Government has declared the virus outbreak a national disaster, and some steps have been taken to reduce infection, but this does not go far enough.

Our government is only for the benefit of the elite, this is demonstrated by its reluctance to act swiftly to protect the working class and the poor against the ravages of this virus. Not enough concrete measures have been announced to cushion the working class and the poor from the financial impact of the virus. For example, a debt relief fund for SMME's and Micro enterprises has been proposed by the Department of Small Business Development to protect small business owners, amid interruptions in productivity and loss of income, but there has been no mention of debt relief for individuals and families' especially as most of them will have their income streams interrupted. Italy is currently at the epicenter of the disease and its government has placed a suspension on monthly home loan repayments, and banks are offering workers' and their families' debt repayment holidays.

The South African Reserve Bank announced only a 1% reduction in interest rates, but this is not good

enough. NUMSA re-iterates the demand for the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) to scrap inflation targeting. The U.S. Federal Reserve has reduced interest rates to 0,25% and they are working on a stimulus package which will include compensating all workers with cash. At the beginning of the month the Federal Reserve reduced interest rates to half a percentage point as an emergency measure to stimulate the economy in the wake of the epidemic. As usual the SARB is out of touch with reality and with the needs of our society and it is doing its utmost best to protect the value of white wealth, instead of responding to the needs of our society. This is why we have always called for it to be nationalized because it does not serve our national interests.

NUMSA has also consistently called for our hospitals to be nationalized, and for private healthcare to be abolished in its entirety. The government of Spain has nationalized all private hospitals in response to the coronavirus in order to guarantee quality healthcare for all who are affected. Our government is silent on this question. The department of Economic Development said in its statement that it has published regulations that will allow "healthcare providers to coordinate their actions as part of Department of Health efforts, including the sharing of facilities and beds, medical supplies nurses and doctors between different companies and with government".

It is unclear if these services will be free to the public, and that is deeply concerning for us because the majority of the population is not on medical aid, and they will not be able to afford these services. And one has to wonder how this cooperation will work in a practical sense because the standard of private healthcare compared to the standards in the public sector are vastly different. Our state hospitals are collapsing and they are drastically under resourced in terms of basic medication, sanitizing equipment and staff.

Companies are planning to shut down for several weeks, or possibly even months' and some are advising workers to use their leave days, or they are simply laying off workers. the Department of Labour said this week that the short term UIF benefit would kick in for companies in financial distress. Workers who need special leave because they have been quarantined for two weeks will be fully paid, but if it is for longer, then UIF benefits will kick in. We are concerned because we know of many instances where companies deduct UIF from employees, but they fail to pay contributions over to the fund. This will leave many workers in the lurch and without any alternatives to support themselves and their families' when the UIF benefit runs out.

NUMSA is demanding that this government must immediately implement measures which will cushion against the negative social impact which the virus will have. These measures must include:

1. Private hospitals must be nationalized and open to all

2. Testing and treatment for coronavirus must be free

3. Cut interest rates down to zero for the duration of the epidemic and create stimulus packages for the economy

4. A basic income grant must be made available for the poor

5. Guaranteed paid leave for all workers who have been placed on quarantine, or short-time/layoff because of the temporary shutdown of plants.

6. All home loan and rent payments including all debt repayments must be suspended until after the epidemic has been dealt with

7. Food parcels must be provided for all those on self-isolation or quarantine in our townships and informal settlements

8. It must be mandatory for all companies to adhere to the World Health Organization standards of cleanliness in the workplace. Workers who are forced to work and who are exposed to the public, eg. garage workers, cashiers, waiters etc, all workers in the service industry must be provided with safety masks, sanitizers and gloves while on duty by the employer. This must be enforced with severe penalties for those who fail to adhere.

Today on Human Rights Day we honour the memory of the brave men and women of Sharpeville who were killed for protesting against the cruel and unjust 'Dompas' system in the Sharpeville Massacre. This system was similar to the one implemented by the German Nazi government which forced German Jews to carry documentation identifying themselves. The residents of Sharpeville were shot by Apartheid police for fighting for a better life for themselves and their families. They believed that the end of the brutal racist Apartheid system would mean that the African working class majority would live a better life. This meant access to quality education, healthcare and housing for the working class majority.

Unfortunately, Capitalism has entrenched inequality and over the last 26 years it has demonstrated an inability to respond to the needs of our society as whole. Access to quality healthcare is a human right. If we fail to implement these emergency measures we will never recover from the devastating impact of the virus. Our economic growth prospects will be much worse than what they are now, and poverty and inequality will worsen. But worse than that, we risk losing many more lives, not just because of the virus, but also because of poverty and hunger. It is time to put the well-being of society ahead of rampant profiteering.

Aluta continua!

The struggle continues!

*Source **No Borders News**.*

Culture Wars and Class Wars

25 March 2020, by Phil Hearse

One author says for the Left to engage in culture wars means:

"Whether dealing with matters of race, age, region, sex or sexuality, this is a framing of politics that essentially punches sideways rather than upwards."

As against this "Finding common cause on a class basis is how reactionary ideas within the working class can be challenged…" [1]

Similarly, a curious editorial in the Morning Star, under the title "A Culture War is No Substitute for Class Politics", takes John McDonnell to task for suggesting the Left needs to wage an online culture war against the Right, saying that:

"McDonnell argues for a 'culture war' which we can win with leading edge creativity. But that is no substitute at all for challenging the actual existing mechanisms by which corporate power is exercised." [2]

Which is a spectacular example of false counterposition.

But the essential argument of the 'down with culture wars' Left is that finding common cause on class issues is the way that reactionary ideas can be defeated. This is simplistic and one-sided, and does not address the real situation in Britain or many other countries including the United States.

That reality is that culture wars have been imposed on the working class and the Left – by the Right and the extreme right. This is not a new process, of course, but one that has been heightened recently by the surge of anti-immigrant xenophobia, which ensured the victory of the 'Yes' vote in the 2016 referendum and the final conquest of the Conservative Party by its most right-wing faction. And that while of course trying to unite workers in struggle is a crucial background to defeating reaction, it is not enough.

In the era of Trump, Farage, Salvini and Johnson, the crucial weapons that have been used to divide the working class are anti-immigrant racism and xenophobia, as well as misogyny, homophobia and reactionary hyper-masculinity, some of which have gone deeply into sections of the working class. Fighting against these things is the specific form of the culture war that the Left has to wage. It would be much better if we did not have to, but this is the situation we face.

The ruling class reaches for racism and xenophobia

An anecdote. In 2001 I went to a Globalise Resistance conference in Hammersmith Town Hall. This was the period in which the global justice movement was surging internationally. A speaker from the American organisation Global Exchange said, to huge applause "We're winning this one." Soon after, a giant global justice march, with hundreds of thousands expected, was scheduled for Washington on 15 September. But four days before it happened, the 9/11 attacks took place. In the atmosphere that followed, the organisers were compelled to cancel the march. What followed was a huge war drive and Islamophobic offensive by the Bush regime and the Right internationally.

This rightist offensive had a mixed effect in Europe. The 2002 European Social Forum in Florence was preceded by a giant march around anti-war and anti-neoliberal themes. The march was warmly welcomed by local people, who cheered and hung banners from blocks of flats on the route, something hard to imagine in Italy today. [3] In 2002 and 2003 a formidable international anti-war movement was built, not least the Stop the War Coalition in the UK which mobilised up to two million people in London the eve of the war.

But tragically even this level of opposition could not prevent war in the Middle East, especially given the near-unanimity of the Republican and Democrats in the United States. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq set the scene for a giant Islamophobic campaign by the Right and the extreme Right, which became the cutting edge of racism in many countries, feeding into the anti-immigrant racist wave.

The wars also created hundreds of thousands of refugees, especially as the crisis without end for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan and then the people of Syria led to an inevitable attempt by many thousands to get to European countries.

At the same time massive poverty, combined with right-wing and drug gang violence, drove hundreds of thousands of Central Americans towards the US border. These immigrants were seized upon as a target by the extreme Right to generate mass racism, in Europe and the United States: this anti-immigrant xenophobia created the basis for Trump and the Brexit 'yes' vote. Neither Obama, who deported three million 'illegal' immigrants, nor New Labour figures like Gordon Brown ("British jobs for British workers"), fought the racist tide. Today Islamophobia remains the centre-piece of racism and xenophobia in Britain and throughout Europe – especially in Italy. The Italian extreme right Lega party and its fascist allies in the Brothers of Italy have added anti-Roma racism, something that has gone widely across Europe from France to Hungary, and in the latter case a large dose of anti-Semitism has been added. [4]

White racism in the UK

Ten years ago many people on the Left thought that the battle against racism and for multiculturalism had been won, and that multiculturalism was

becoming the dominant outlook of people in the UK. [5] But in 2020 that view must be challenged, especially after the upsurge of xenophobia around the Brexit vote. Recent opinion poll results show some alarming trends, for example that 47% of white people who voted Remain in the 2016 referendum say that wanting to reduce immigration to ensure white dominance is racist. [6] But only 5% of those who voted Leave agree. Overall 66% of voters who generally favour immigration say wanting to preserve white dominance is racist: just three per cent of anti-immigrant voters agree. These figures are reflected in similar opinion polls in the US. What do they tell us?

First, that voting Leave in the EU referendum strongly correlates with being anti-immigration, and that most often corresponds to being in favour of maintaining a white majority. But we knew that anyway. Contrary to what is imagined by 'Lexiteer' tendencies, the 2016 referendum and its mobilisation of anti-immigrant, anti-European xenophobia, set the scene for the eventual takeover of the Conservative Party by the hard right, and then the Tory victory in the 2019 general election. [7]

Second, anti-immigration voters are increasingly comfortable with wanting to defend what they see as the special interests of the white majority, i.e. being more or less openly racist and openly repudiating multiculturalism.

But there is worse to come. White self-interest (aka racism) is increasingly seen in elite right-wing circles as perfectly respectable. For example, a recent report by Eric Kaufmann, Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, published by the pro-Conservative Policy Exchange think tank, insists that 'racial self interest is not racism'. [8] Apply that to white South Africans under apartheid or white Americans in the Deep South during the civil rights battles, and see what you get. A cover-up for racism, pure and simple. Kaufman's own research shows that white self-interest racism strongly correlates to voting Leave in 2016, or voting for Donald Trump in the same year. Why are we not surprised? Eric Kaufman's recent book incidentally is called *Whiteshift*.

Kaufman's report, warmly welcomed by Policy Exchange, parallels extreme right 'identarian' ideas, as expounded by the small fascist group Generation Identity. The shocking thing is not that lots of Tories and other right-wingers hold effectively white supremacist ideas, but that they can be openly paraded and championed, giving an elite Conservative green light to all those who want an all-white Britain.

Identitarian ideas closely parallel the 'clash of civilisations' theory put forward first by Bernard Lewis and popularised by Samuel Huntington.

Aspects of a right-wing culture war – misogyny, homophobia and militarism

Culture wars take place because in liberal democracies, however circumscribed civil liberties have become, the capitalist class and reactionaries in general want their ideas to be dominant. Indeed for the hard right to come to power and stay in power reaction has to have a mass base. The term 'culture war' is just one way to describe the inevitable ideological clashes which the hard-right offensive internationally generates. As we have described above, racism and xenophobia have been key to the ascent of the hard right and fascists in the United States, Europe and beyond. But the grip of reactionary ideology on the outlook of millions of people involves much more than racism.

Divisions in the working class are constantly reproduced by misogyny and homophobia. The extent and precise configuration of these reactionary outlooks differs across different societies. For example, the rash of 'LBGT-free zones' in Poland is based on a mobilisation of 'traditional' Catholic culture, as is that country's constant war against abortion rights. In the United States, it is much more for difficult for mainstream politicians to be openly anti-LGBT rights, although the Christian churches are. But anti-abortion sentiment is rampant on the right, and has led to the passing of anti-abortion legislation in 30 states. Donald Trump attended this year's national 'pro-life' demonstration, probably not because he has strong views on the issue, but because he wants to keep the Christian so-called 'moral majority' onside in an election year.

To be labour movement or socialist activists in the United States it is impossible to merely try to unite workers around immediate issues and 'punch upwards'. A specific fight has to be conducted on the issue of abortion rights, and in colliding with sections of the masses who hold reactionary ideas, will inevitably 'punch sideways'. If this is part of a culture war, then it is one the Left has to wage.

An example from popular culture: *American Sniper*

How popular culture reinforces reaction was demonstrated by the success of Clint Eastwood's 2014 movie *American Sniper*, starring Bradley Cooper. The movie celebrates a US Marine sniper Chris Kyle, a psychopathic killer who was said to have shot 255 people in Iraq. The film merges anti-Arab racism, gun culture, militarism, misogyny and hyper-masculinity in a toxic, hate-filled orgy of American nationalism. Kyle was eventually shot dead by a fellow military vet suffering from post-traumatic stress at a shooting range in the US.

American Sniper had huge success in cinemas in the United States and elsewhere and afterwards on Amazon Prime. It eventually grossed more than half a billion dollars in box office receipts, with one of the most successful opening weekends ever.

The Guardian's Phil Hoad reported on how the movie hit its target audience:

"What's clear from audience analysis is that distributor Warner Brothers hit a target-demographic bullseye – one that has proved largely resistant to

Iraq-war material thus far. Red-state America (i.e. states that vote Republican -PH) has been lapping up American Sniper, with eight out of the 10 top markets for the film in the south or midwest, like San Antonio, Oklahoma City, Houston and Nashville – an unusual state of affairs for the average studio film. Fifty-seven per cent of the weekend's audience was male, 63% was over 25. Specialist marketing lionising Chris Kyle, 'the most lethal sniper in American military history', drummed up an appetite for the subject matter via outlets like Fox News, military blogs and?Soldier of Fortune magazine." [9]

Figures which show a majority male, over-25 audience are very revealing. All over the advanced capitalist world extreme right and fascist parties appeal especially to older men – although of course parties with a mass appeal get millions of votes not in that demographic.

Henry Giroux has described the kind of culture in American Sniper as a glorification of cruelty – a society filled with violence and racism, mass shootings, contempt for and cruelty to the poor, militarised policing, and never-ebbing violence towards women, the Black population and LBGT+ people. [10]

Fighting this kind of culture involves numerous political and ideological fronts and political campaigns. The irreducible background to overcoming reaction is the struggle of the working class and its allies, often on economic and social questions directly associated with living standards and access to basic services like health and social care. But the Right has to be fought on its chosen terrains, even if it means fighting from a minority or unpopular position.

This is not something new in the socialist movement. In one of the founding texts of Bolshevism, Lenin insisted that 'social democrats' – i.e. revolutionary socialists – had to confront every type of oppression and tyranny in order to develop the political consciousness of the masses. His words have a decidedly modern ring about them:

"Is it true that, in general, the economic struggle 'is the most widely applicable?means' of drawing the masses into the political struggle? It is entirely untrue. Any and every manifestation of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, not only in connection with the economic struggle, is not one whit less 'widely applicable' as a means of 'draining' in the masses. The rural superintendents and the flogging of peasants, the corruption of the officials and the police treatment of the "common people" in the cities, the fight against the famine-stricken and the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge, the extortion of taxes and the persecution of the religious sects, the humiliating treatment of soldiers and the barrack methods in the treatment of the students and liberal intellectuals — do all these and a thousand other similar manifestations of tyranny, though not directly connected with the 'economic' struggle, represent, in general, less 'widely applicable' means and occasions for political agitation and for drawing the masses into the political struggle? The very opposite is true. Of the sum total of cases in which the workers suffer (either on their own account or on account of those closely connected with them) from tyranny, violence, and the lack of rights, undoubtedly only a small minority represent cases of police tyranny in the trade union struggle as such. Why then should we, beforehand, restrict the scope of political agitation by declaring only one of the means to be 'the most widely applicable', when Social-Democrats must have, in addition, other, generally speaking, no less 'widely applicable' means?" [11]

In other words, we fight all oppression, everywhere. Not just things immediately able to 'unite the class'.

Culture war is not only waged by reactionary mass media – newspapers, TV shows, the Internet and films – but is intertwined with a huge push on the intellectual front. Reaction wants to stamp out progressive, left-wing, feminist and above all socialist-Marxist thought in the colleges and universities. It understands that cadres won for the Left in universities and schools are invaluable resources for the future. It wants those young intellectual cadres for itself. And to this end it has created hundreds of think tanks and magazines devoted to pumping out reactionary theories. They are massively funded by billionaires like the Koch brothers.

In the United Sates, right wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute and many others dispose of multi-million-dollar budgets and employ hundreds of 'faculty' staff – researchers and writers. In Britain this role is played by organisations like the Adam Smith Institute, the Social Market Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies. Think tanks try to reach out not only into the universities, but especially the media and the government itself.

This is a culture war that cannot be evaded by the Left. It is aimed at undermining Marxism, feminism and multiculturalism, catching social democracy and Keynesianism in the cross-fire.

The culture war against social reaction is not something designed to divide the working class, but on the contrary is aimed at creating the preconditions for long-term unity in the working class and the oppressed in general.

11 March 2020

Footnotes

[1] David McAllister, *Counterfire* "Six practical and theoretical suggestions to build a broad, united and fighting left".

[2] *Morning Star* 27 January 2020 "A culture war is no substitute for class politics".

[3] A report in *New Internationalist* bitterly complained that the Forum was dominated by the Party of Communist Refoundation and the Fourth International, by which they really meant the French LCR.

[4] *The Independent* 28 July 2019 " Voices:
We need to talk about the rising wave of anti-Roma attacks in Europe".

[5] See for example *The Guardian* 22 April 2013 "Multiculturalism has won the day. Let's move on ".

[6] Quoted at *Policy Exchange* 3 March 2017 "Multiculturalism has won the day. Let's move on".

[7] The worst of these forces was 'The Full Brexit', see its founding statement at The Full Brexit.

[8] *Policy Exchange* 3 March 2017 "
'Racial Self-Interest' is not Racism".

[9] *The Guardian* 21 January 2015 "American Sniper's record-breaking box office: who saw it, where and why ".

[10] Henry Giroux, *American Nightmare*, City Lights Books, 2018

[11] V.I. Lenin, marxists.org "What is to Done?".

Covid-19 crisis: give priority to reproduction over production

24 March 2020, by Aurore Koechlin

Throughout part of the 19th century, it was a question of working until death, according to the testimony of Marx and Engels, among others. Historically, it was the class struggle that helped regulate the appropriation of labour power by the capitalists. But this is also due to the internal limits to the reproduction of labour power. [1] If the capitalists "spend" the workers' lives too quickly without allowing new generations to reach working age, then we see a crisis in the reproduction of the workforce. And without labour, there is no surplus value.

While there is a fundamental contradiction between production and reproduction under capitalism (the reproduction of the labour force necessarily requires its protection, which reduces production), nevertheless, the latter is a kind of limit that cannot be overcome by capitalism. There is therefore indeed an imperative necessity for capitalism to reproduce labour power, as well as to produce surplus value. But ordinarily this need is disguised, including - indeed especially - in the eyes of the majority of workers. Reproductive labour, mostly still done in the home, is invisible. By extension, we attach little consideration to reproductive work, that is however vital to our very survival.

Right now, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, when the whole economy is on hold, and we are worried about what we are going to eat tonight, if we are going to be able to see our parents, our children, and so on, the question comes back very acutely before our eyes. But while it is becoming visible and material on an individual scale, it is also visible to the capitalists. It takes the form of an warning bell as to the disproportionate progression of neoliberalism, which endangers even the very conditions of our lives. If production is limitless, the necessary reproduction must follow it. The coronavirus crisis can be interpreted in this sense.

Thus, the French government's measures to deal with the coronavirus are indicative of the crisis situation that we are in. Because even if they arrive criminally late, precisely because the capitalists have favoured production for many months over reproduction (here, the health of workers), their level of reaction is an indicator of the extent of the threat.

Closure of educational establishments, of non-vital businesses, maximum replacement of work by telework, then the start of confinement. The measures are important and impressive. What is more, on the social networks, many have ironized about President Emmanuel Macron's "left" turn: praise for public services outside the law of the market, suspension of redundancies, a promise to later draw "all the consequences" of the situation. In reality, this policy reveals two things.

First, this "Keynesian flash", as Romaric Godin calls it, is a political gamble. [2] Macron has made a wager: while he is one of the most hated presidents of the Fifth Republic, if he can manage the crisis, he will save his mandate. So, it costs him nothing to praise the public services which he inherited and which he even tried by to destroy - now that they are in place, he has every interest in defending them in his discourse (because the reality is something else). If this is what allows France to manage the coronavirus crisis, he can add it to his balance sheet.

It is also in this sense that we must interpret the confection of his new image as father of the nation, above social conflicts. He appeals to the workers, he appeals to the bosses, in a pure Gaullist tradition. He promulgates general guidelines on containment, leaving to his ministers the practical details: he is above these trivial questions. He can even afford to postpone pension reform. Which is clever, because it can even leave the door open to postponing it sine die, if he considers the political cost too high: he can always point to the coronavirus.

In short, for Macron, the coronavirus can be a political boon and we must not be fooled by his presenting himself as the saviour. However, we must recognize that it is a good

performance. Putting in place progressive measures, based first of all on conviction less than on repression (as evidenced by interior minister Castaner's leitmotif: "Our objective is not to sanction") is clever, but insufficient. These measures should have been taken two weeks ago, as remorseful former health minister Agnes Buzyn has suggested. Taken only now, they will not prevent thousands of deaths, which could have been avoided.

In the same way, how can we explain the incompetence of a government that was unable to anticipate what the situation was for the coming pandemic? Weren't there all the cries of alert from China and Italy? How is it that we are currently unable to do what doctors have deemed most effective: detect and treat massively? How is it that we lack the most basic medical equipment, masks and hydroalcoholic gel, and the most necessary, such as ventilators?

Second, these measures are indicators of the scale of the crisis. They are, in a way, capitalist emergency measures to prevent a major reproductive crisis. But the limits that capitalism meets to save reproduction are always the same: they are those of production. So, while Macron's call is for everyone to be responsible, he sends the opposite signal by continuing to push people to go to work, even in nonessential sectors. And in terms of essential sectors, the measures are not up to par for caregivers or people working in food, sectors which are enormously feminized because they participate in reproduction: it would be necessary to equip all workers with FFP2 masks and hydroalcoholic gels, and endow these sectors with billions that will nevertheless go to businesses.

Capitalism alone cannot resolve its own contradictions. It is up to the workers to impose their conditions. Right now, priority should be given to reproduction over production. Money must be injected as a priority in the health and food sectors. We need to nationalize the companies that manufacture essential medical equipment in the situation.

Finally, having been late, given our limited medical and technical capacities and the speed of the virus's spread, another central measure must be total containment outside sectors essential to collective survival. Obviously, this confinement should ideally be the result of a collective decision, from below, and not authoritatively imposed by the government. But we note the double difficulty of both mobilizing in a period when mobilization goes against security and raising the level of awareness of people in the face of danger.

This is also the result of a global ignorance of medicine and health in general, which is not considered to be a field of general knowledge and should be genuinely instilled in everyone. We are paying the cost today, and that should prompt us to rethink our societies' relationship to medical knowledge in general.

However, in this situation, we, as activists and trade unionists, are not unarmed. Information, first, is essential, especially informed information. We must make available and accessible reliable information for our social camp. Next, strike action must make it possible to impose the closure of non-essential sectors, to demand working conditions which respect safety standards for essential sectors, as Italy has shown us.

This is already the case in many workplaces, and it is spreading like wildfire, with strikes in the aeronautical sector, in the Atlantic shipyards, in the assembly plants of Le Havre, in General Electric in Burgundy, at PSA Mulhouse and at Amazon. This is how we must continue

Finally, we are obliged, since the production sectors are closed, and after having denigrated this mode of organization for a long time, to think about the self-organization of reproduction. It is at the level of buildings, neighbourhoods, that solidarity initiatives are being launched today. There may be unprecedented experiences, even in times of extreme crisis like today, of reorganization of reproduction. These are also the last spaces of politicization with the exception of social media and the rare workplaces that will remain open, since the home, the building, are the last space for possible social relationships, while maintaining of course the safety rules.

More than ever, the personal is the political!

Translated by ***International Virwpoint*** *from* ***Contretemps****.*

Footnotes

[1] We refer here to the theory of social reproduction. We define as reproductive labour any work of (re)production of labour power. It is deployed in three main areas: the family (domestic labour), public services (education, health), and personal services.

[2] Médiapart, 11 March 2020 "Gare à l'effet d'optique : un «flash keynésien» n'est pas un changement de paradigme ".

Some notes on learning from AIDS activism for our responses to the Coronavirus

(COVID-19) pandemic.

23 March 2020, by Gary Kinsman

Referring to AIDS organizing and activism I refer firstly (but not only) to the treatment based (but always much broader) direct action informed activism associated with various AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) groups that existed across the USA, in 'Canada,' and around the globe (some of which still exist) or groups like AIDS ACTION NOW! (AAN!) based in Toronto. These groups with the themes of "Silence=Death, Action=Life" focused on fighting to get access for people living with AIDS/HIV to treatments to fight the infections that were actually killing people. They put the needs of people most affected by AIDS at the centre of the social response. I am also referring to the first wave of the setting up of community based groups in the early 1980s (and later) that supported people living with AIDS/HIV, developed education and fought against discrimination when governments were leaving people to die. It was these community initiatives growing out of gay and lesbian, and to some extent the feminist and progressive health movements, that provided support for people affected by AIDS in the face of state inaction and indifference from the elites of the medical profession. These forms of activism extended and saved people's lives.

Like all health emergencies the AIDS crisis was/is a condensation of many social relations – including sexuality, race, gender, class, poverty, underdevelopment, colonialism and neocolonialism, ability, drug use, sex work, the power of pharmaceutical corporations, the character of the medical profession, problems with public health and so much more. It is always important to ask which 'public' is being defended and whose 'health' is being protected? For the AIDS crisis to be fully addressed all of these relations had to be engaged with.

The current pandemic includes all of this and more but in a context where neoliberal capitalist relations have gone much further in their destruction of health care, social assistance and the social wage, and the generation of precarious wage labour in many countries. The power of multinational pharmaceutical corporations over our lives has intensified.

More specifically, there are a number of connections needing to be made:

'Expendable populations' and fighting discrimination and stigmatization.

In the early years of the AIDS crisis there was little official and state response since it was seen as only affecting 'expendable populations' — gay men/men who have sex with men, drug users, Haitians and other people of colour (including the racist construction of 'African AIDS') and sex workers. These were the groups identified as the "high risk groups" and this term was lifted out of epidemiological discourse to organize social discrimination and stigmatization against these groups. These people were thought by moral conservative (and often neoliberal) governments as 'expendable' and therefore years of social and health care response were lost in the fight against AIDS. Instead the 'general population' (coded as white, middle class and heterosexual) was defended against the 'vectors' and 'reservoirs' of infection. Early AIDS organizing fought against this by refocusing on the risk activities that anyone could engage in and by affirming the importance of the lives and needs of people living with AIDS/HIV and the communities most affected by AIDS. AIDS activism fought against discrimination and racist responses to AIDS. It also took up the concerns of those who were being ignored in the social response to AIDS, including the needs of women and people of colour. AIDS activists argued for the needs of those most directly affected to be at the centre of the social response and not only the needs of the non-infected.

In the current pandemic there has been the social organization of discrimination, racism, and stigmatization against people from China, Korea and other Asian countries, including continuing references by Trump and others to the 'Chinese' virus (or for some the 'Asian' virus). In a slightly more localized fashion this has also been mobilized against people from Iran — in the middle eastern context in particular. This early focus on the pandemic as only affecting 'other' people (and only viewing these 'other' people as the 'threat') led to weeks of delay in developing a response in many state and official circles.

But there are also ways in which those most vulnerable to the coronavirus — older people and those living with compromised or weakened immune systems – including people with cancer, HIV infection, diabetes, heart conditions, and forms of disability — are seen as also being 'expendable.' This was especially clear in the first responses of Boris Johnson and the UK government with their mobilization of 'herd immunity,' or, what some people conjuring up pseudo-eugenic aspirations referred to as the 'culling' of the population. The elderly were viewed as 'non-productive' (in relation to capitalist production), or by some as a 'drain' on social resources — in contrast to Indigenous traditions where elders are seen as having wisdom and are treated with great respect– and those with immune-compromised bodies, including those with cancer and HIV, often those living with disabilities were also viewed by these people as 'expendable.'

With the articulation of 'washing your hands" as part of the preventative measures this means that all those who cannot access clean water (like many on First Nation reserves in

'Canada') also become 'expendable.' With the official advice of 'social distance' and 'social isolation' as the way to prevent transmission this also makes all those who do not have the material basis to do this becoming 'expendable.' It is now clear to me that the term 'social distancing' participates in dissolving the social and since we need to maintain and build the social in the context of this pandemic we need to use terms like spatial or physical distancing instead. Those who cannot participate in these distancing and isolation practices include the poor and homeless (who are often racialized), and those in institutions (including nursing homes) and prisons, as well as those who cannot miss waged work when they are sick given the massive growth of precarious labour and the lack of paid sick days and social support given the ripping apart of the social wage by neoliberal capital. The class and racialized dimensions of this become very clear. Finally the closing of borders serves to place the lives of refugees, migrants and those without status in very difficult situations. These are mostly people of colour.

All these approaches prioritize the lives of those least at 'risk' of death from the coronavirus — the younger, the 'healthy,' the non-disabled, those with healthy immune systems, and the wealthy over everyone else. It is their health that was being protected. They became the 'public' to be defended from those who could potentially die from COVID-19. Calls for attention to the specific needs of Indigenous nations and communities, homeless people in the shelter systems, the need for all workers to have paid sick leave and relief from evictions and mortgages and to be able to refuse unsafe work, the need for adequate social supports. and for the needs of refugees and migrant workers to be addressed are ways to actively cut across this. This must be taken up as central to social responses to the pandemic.

Social solidarity/responsibility – from safe practices to 'spatial or physical distancing.'

When people including Michael Callen (an early AIDS activist living with AIDS) began to figure out that whatever was causing AIDS (this was before HIV was identified) was transmitted through specific sexual acts and blood to blood contact this led to the development of safe sex and later safe practice guidelines for injection drug use and other practices that meant there was no transfer of bodily fluids or blood to blood contact. These practices were effective in lowering HIV transmission. This was not an individualist response but was instead based on a sense of group social and collective responsibility and meant that people with support were able to alter their social practices for the benefit of their communities. It was not easy for people to alter their practices so this was based on a great deal of popular education and community support. Much of this was based on the assumption that everyone was infected so it broke down the barriers between those infected and those not. Regarding drug use it became central to harm reduction practices. It became part of a community ethics. In relation to safe sex it was also based on the eroticization of safe sex and practising safe sex as fun. This is how safe sex campaigns worked. Safe sex was the erotic and social way to do it for everyone.

In the current pandemic this takes a different form but also one that has to be social and collective in character if it is to work. Spatial or physical distancing – combined with hand washing, use of gloves and coughing/sneezing into one's sleeve etc — is now what is socially necessary and responsible to lower the infection and death rates. This is also based on the need for all of us to continue engaging in the vital work of social reproduction (including increasing caring labour) even in more distanced and isolated ways. It is this labour of everyday/everynight social reproduction — much of which is not waged and often associated with women (both cis and trans) in the prevailing gender division of labour — that creates the very possibilities for our survival. We need to change our social practices and this requires social support and solidarity, especially to protect those most at risk of death from COVID-19. This means opposing the selfish individualism often displayed in response to a health crisis bred in capitalist societies.

Like with safe practices this collective response requires popular education and social support. While governments and officials can encourage this much of the impetus for this must come from below and we need to provide mass support for doing this. There are some inspirations for this in the early support groups for people living with AIDS/HIV, the buddy systems, and more in early grass roots responses to the AIDS crisis. Networks of mutual aid and social solidarity to support people are being formed in many locations (there is a list of some resources below) in the current pandemic and these need to be facilitated and given resources. Without violating spatial or physical distancing we need to provide support and solidarity for people. For those who have to engage in isolation practices we also need to provide as much support and care as we can. These initiatives will be crucial in determining whether we can slow the infection and death rate. The next few months will be crucial on a global scale.

Health care for all! – health from above to from below.

Central to AIDS activism was health care for all. In the USA ACT UP groups engaged in important campaigns for universal access to health-care. In the 'Canadian' context and other countries with more of a 'welfare state' there was more access to health care but still major problems (no Pharmacare, very expensive treatments, no coverage for dental

care etc). Since the 1980s and 1990s things have largely got worse with major attacks by neoliberal capital and state agencies on access to and the quality of health care and a growing privatizing of health care. Existing health infrastructures have been weakened and torn apart. As Mike Davis points out in the context of the current pandemic:

"capitalist globalization now appears to be biologically unsustainable in the absence of a truly international public health infrastructure. But such an infrastructure will never exist until peoples' movements break the power of Big Pharma and for-profit health care."

Here Davis raises major concerns about the need for our survival to shift the character of health care away from capitalist profit rates and the domination of big Pharma. If we are going to be successful in addressing this pandemic it requires major transformations in health care and social policy. This needs to be based on universal free access to quality health care, and free access to testing, treatments and vaccines when they become available — and the spending of major social resources on developing treatments and vaccines. Informed by feminist health organizing and AIDS activism this also needs to be a health from below where people get to take more control over their bodies and health in a rupture with capitalist health care and the power of the pharmaceutical corporations. This requires a major shift from health from above to a health from below. Michel Foucault, a French theorist, wrote about the development of 'biopolitics' where forms of social power mobilized bodies and the population as a resource for ruling forms of power starting in the 19th century. ACT UP type politics began to articulate what can be called a 'biopolitics' from below which is what we will need to address and build on in ending this pandemic.

Transferring Resources to the 'Global South'

In the AIDS crisis AIDS activists called in the Montreal Manifesto (issued by ACT UP NYC and AIDS ACTION NOW! at the World AIDS conference in Montreal in 1989) for a major transfer of wealth and resources to people in the global south if the ravages of AIDS were going to be successfully fought. This was based on an understanding of how the underdevelopment of much of the global south was based on the transfer of wealth and resources through colonialism and imperialism to 'overdevelopment' in the global north. If people were going to be successful in combating AIDS they needed more wealth and resources and these needed to come from the more wealthy countries in the 'global north.' While these campaigns had only a limited impact they pointed in a very important direction.

In the current pandemic the situation is a bit different and even though China faced the first attacks of this virus they and Cuba are now the only countries in the world who seem to have the skills and resources to help people in Iran, Italy, Iraq, Venezuela, Nicaragua and other countries. We can actually see how neoliberal capitalism and its tearing apart of social programs and the social relations of health have weakened the ability of countries like the USA and many countries in Europe to be able to respond to this pandemic. At the same time forms of colonialism and neocolonialism and imperialism still cause major forms of 'underdevelopment' in major parts of the 'global south' and the transfer of resources, wealth and expertise there are urgently needed.

An important part of this now is also to end the sanctions against Iran and Venezuela that are making it far more difficult for these societies to respond to this pandemic. The sanctions against Cuba actually make it more difficult for other countries to be able to use the medical experience that Cuba has gained. These sanctions must be ended. The Israeli state in its restriction of what can enter Gaza and the occupied territories is also making it more difficult for Palestinians to survive this pandemic. The Israeli state must let aid and assistance in and not leave Palestinians to die.

Problems with distancing and isolation.

There are problems with the solutions proposed to stop the spread of the coronavirus. While absolutely necessary 'social distancing' (what needs to be called spatial or physical distancing) and 'social isolation' (what needs to be called spatial or physical isolation) can be taken up in a very individualist way. Those with lots of material resources are able to accomplish this far easier than others and there are major racialized class implications. These measures also can facilitate isolation and depression and exacerbate mental health problems in people who need everyday social contact. 'Social isolation' with abusive partners can intensify problems of domestic abuse and violence against women and we must develop ways to respond to this. We need to also see that there is a lot of work/activity involved in 'distancing' and 'isolation' and this needs to be recognized and supported. We need to provide as much social support and solidarity for this 'distancing' and make it clear this is a needed and necessary social and collective response. In this sense we need to see it as the opposite of an individualist response but view it as our social and community responsibility. We need to consistently check in on people via telephone, email, facetime and other social media. We need to make sure people are able to get their groceries and whatever else they need. We need social solidarity and mutual aid and need to facilitate networks that can accomplish this. The scenes from Italy, Lebanon and other places of people singing to, and with, each other from their balconies are an inspiring example of what is very possible and badly needed. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we all engaged in collective practices of survival and find joy, play and pleasure wherever and whenever we can in doing this.

Opposing the dissolving of our social struggles and movements and resisting the social organization of forgetting – Returning to the streets when we can.

From above they are using 'social distancing' and the ban on public gatherings in the streets to attempt to dissolve our public struggles and movements. In the AIDS crisis we resisted their attempts to have us so overwhelmed with grief that we could not continue our collective struggles. We resisted this through the political mobilization of anger, rage and grief including with the development of 'political funerals.' But in the AIDS crisis we were still able to express publicly our social and collective response and our power from below in direct actions. In this pandemic we can no longer do this.

Those in power are attempting to use this pandemic to dissolve our social struggles and to further there class and racial interests. The wave of declaration of states of emergency, while necessary in very important ways, can also give state agencies powers they can use against us collectively and individually. We need to remember how quarantine legislation was used against the communities of people most affected by the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s.

This demobilization of struggle is very clear regarding the Wet'suwet'en struggle for sovereignty and against pipelines and 'man camps,' in the major teachers struggles in Ontario, and perhaps most clearly in the halting of mobilization against the neoliberal pension reform and in the continuing Yellow Vest struggles in France. We need to keep these struggles going, even if using new tactics. For instance, this year's Israeli Apartheid Week (a pro-Palestinian global week of education and action) has had to cancel and postpone many events and this week is being kept alive via social media. The Wet'suwet'en struggle continues via telephone and social media and popular education in a more dispersed fashion.

We need these struggles to be kept alive in the various ways that we can, and also use this pandemic period to do as much popular education on these and other struggles as we can. This means using social media as a terrain of struggle, while at the same time recognizing its limitations including that not everyone has access to it — and how measures like the closing of libraries will further limit access to it. We need to use the internet and social media as much as possible as a terrain for remembering and for critical social analysis. We must not allow them to make us forget about the struggles we were engaged in before this pandemic hit nor what we will learn from surviving it about the need to get rid of neoliberal capitalism and for radical social transformation. When the situation again allows for it we must return to the streets and large public assemblies to continue, intensify and to link together our struggles for justice and dignity with the added wisdom of what we will have learned from surviving this crisis.

18 March 2020

Source ***Radical Noise****.*

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1000 Covid-19 deaths in the Spanish State, no end in sight

22 March 2020, by Laia Facet

No Borders News: Describe the state of the pandemic in your country or city. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.

Laia Facet: According to the Ministry of Health, as of March 17, there were more than 13,000 cases and 598 deaths, but by that figure topped 1,000 by March 20. Many of containment measures have come too late so we will have to wait several days before we will know if they are working to lower the curve or not, which is the prime health objective now.

NBN: What practical measures has your national government taken to respond to the crisis? Have they acted responsibly or were they unprepared? Briefly describe measures your government is taking now to contain the virus and treat people infected with Covid-19. Is there a state of emergency, are schools closed, etc.?

LF: As I said, containment measures came late. At no point has the government foreseen how the virus could reach the levels of contagion, and spread as rapidly, it has done so. We have underestimated Covid-19.

This has created shortages in such critical supplies as masks and other medical supplies which are now scarce in medical centers and hospitals across the Spanish State. For example, tests to detect the virus are in short supply. Right now, there are many people with symptoms who haven't been able to get tested.

On Friday, March 13, all colleges, institutes, and universities were closed. And over the weekend and the early days of this week, several public health measures were taken: closure of some commercial establishments (restaurants, bars, etc.); working from home where possible; mobility has been restricted for all people other essential work, caring for people who need support, or go shopping; and, the closure of borders and the prohibition of sporting and cultural events. However, by not ordering the closure of all companies, — except for frontline businesses like pharmacies and supermarkets, the government continues to put the population at risk when it is completely unnecessary.

NBN: How has your health care system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?

LF: Spanish State has a fairly solid public health system compared to other countries in the European Union. However, there are significant deficiencies, as unions and social movements have pointed out for many years. These stem above all from budget cuts and austerity policies following the 2008 economic crisis, including lack of personnel and a shortage of beds, resources, research, etc., much of which has been privatized. Covid-19 has broken these weak links, leading to a collapse of public health resources and personnel.

There is also a parallel private healthcare system that monopolizes a significant percentage of resources, both in research, health infrastructure, and hospital beds. In the first days of the crisis, a very popular demand was to transfer all private health resources to public health. This demand arose in a context where patients who attempted to go to private clinics were turned away and referred to public clinics, a public system that has collapsed.

Currently, the Spanish government's decree of a Covid-19 national emergency contemplates the possibility of making use of private resources by the public health system, but responsibility these measures was assigned to each Autonomous Community, thus guaranteeing very inconsistent implementation. Keep in mind that the Spanish Constitution grants varying degrees of autonomy to municipalities and provinces, as well as nations contained within the federal state such as Catalonia and the Basque Country.

NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.

LF: How this health crisis is handled will have far-reaching political implications. A few days ago, the government's first Decree was made public and contained some of the measures that I have already noted, but it also decreed the State of Emergency. This special measure allows the executive to take political initiatives without authorization from parliament for fifteen days. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's decree gave extraordinary powers to the police, granted the army a role in domestic policing, and concentrated governmental authority in a few ministries, thereby violating autonomous governments and other institutions' rights. These actions pose enormous risks to democracy, all the more so given the international authoritarian context. All this, along with closing of borders has, of course, been applauded by the mainstream conservative People's Party as well as the far-right Vox party. At the moment, the right-wing opposition

bloc is concentrating its criticism on the government's negligence and delay in taking action.

At the same time, the government published a decree containing troublesome economic and labor measures. The decree suspends worker protection and allows temporary collective layoffs to be carried out more quickly. This is the measure that employers are using to dismiss thousands and thousands of workers from companies that have closed during the quarantine. The government has proposed a moratorium on mortgages, but there is no discussion of suspending rent payments. This comes in a context where hundreds of thousands of people are losing their jobs. The government's solution is to cover part of people's wages with public money, but they have not proposed any extraordinary tax on large companies.

NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and health care unions?

The main unions have defended workers against the temporary collective layoffs, but workers' assemblies cannot be held due to virus containment restrictions. Unions with weaker contracts or less influence with their employers are currently overwhelmed. Large-scale violations of labor rights are under way. For example, there are many companies that are forcing their workers to use the accumulated vacation days, which is illegal. And there are companies that are forcing their workers to continue reporting to work regardless of threats to their health. For example, this is very widespread in some industries and in manufacturing and has even caused spontaneous strikes in some factories, forcing them to close.

Elsewhere, domestic workers and supermarket workers find themselves facing dire conditions as they contend with a huge increase in their workloads in the midst of the crisis. These same workers suffer extremely precarious working conditions and salaries, not to mention health risks.

NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?

LF: We face many difficulties in the current state of general confinement. Activism and militancy are also secluded, so organizing is expressed for now mainly through social networks. However, there are two interesting initiatives. On the one hand, support networks have been set up for people who need help buying food or to taking care of their children. We don't yet have a total count for experiences like this, but many neighborhoods are beginning to organize in this manner. On the other hand, within different social, union, and political sectors, a campaign has been organized going by the name "Social Shock Plan" that proposes measures in defense of the working and popular classes to prevent the health crisis from becoming a new social and economic crisis.

NBN: Any final comments about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?

LF: Covid-19 is impacting societies around the world, and is having a very obvious economic and social impact, especially considering that all economists, right and left, in Europe have been warning of a recession even priorto the contagion. The fragility of the financial system is likely to precipitate a recession. In the case of the Spanish State, this is very clear. If the government continues its elevated public spending policies without taking any extraordinary measures to tax big business in order to raise money, then the public debt will rise and, just like in 2008, they will turn to austerity to cover it.

20 March 2020

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Ecuador after the October strike

21 March 2020, by Feminist and Ecosocialist Network

1. A change of course in Ecuador, changes and limitations

October's powerful popular strike in Ecuador surprised not only the right, but also the social movement itself. No one foresaw an explosion of this size, which even took on an insurrectionary character (especially on the weekend of the 12th and 13th). Nor did the Indigenous movement, which discovered that its historic capacity for mobilization and struggle was intact, and unquestionably positioned itself as the leading pole of the strike, and became the catalyst of the struggle against the neoliberal package. October brought a change in the correlation of forces. Even though the social movement has not managed to overcome the crisis that has dogged it for many years, nonetheless, this set the stage for the coming struggles against the neoliberal offensive.

This symbolic and organizational leadership by the Indigenous movement found its main support among the different sectors of the youth, in the women's movement, and in the low-income neighborhoods of Quito and the other cities where important mobilizations developed. The contribution of the organized labour movement, through its unions, was present, but only weakly. Although the transport strike began the stoppage at a national level, this did not correspond to a class interest, but rather to a specific, sectoral one;

once they won their immediate demands, they abandoned the conflict. On the other hand, the occupations of some oil fields in the Amazon region were the product of a mixture of actors, including workers and local inhabitants tired of the state's neglect. This shows the continuing weakness of the country's trade union movement, which has not been overcome in recent decades.

The attempts by the Moreno government to blame Correa and his fellow leaders for the great mobilization of October was as ridiculous as trying to blame Maduro and the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela. In fact, the leaders of the Citizens Revolution movement were conspicuous by their absence during the strike, although supporters of the Correa movement did take part in the mobilizations along with the other currents of the left, the various social movements, and the Indigenous movement. The strike was marked by this impressive unity in action, which was essentially a unity from below, since the leaders of the left said very little and had little impact on the social explosion. In that sense, the strike overcame in practice the pro-Correa/anti-Correa antagonism that has so marked, weakened, and disoriented most of the Ecuadorean left in recent years.

The strike in Ecuador and the months of mobilization in Chile that followed, as well as, in a negative sense, the coup in Bolivia, appear to have opened a new stage in Latin America. A stage in which the radical left will necessarily have to rethink the electoral path towards progressive governments that has dominated the political perspective of the 21st century. Nonetheless, the electoral situation in Ecuador poses as an immediate task the need to develop an option, and preferably a political organization, that can express that unity in action that emerged in October, a political expression that also needs an electoral slate for 2021.

The best option would be unity around an Indigenous candidate, with the support of the different popular sectors and of the Citizen's Revolution movement (but surely without Rafael Correa), and with a clear, anti-neoliberal and anti-extractivist programme. This would be the ideal formula for confronting the right, which has closed ranks and, despite some friction among its components, has an agreement for the elections in order to win the presidency in 2021.

However, it will be quite difficult to unite all the forces that make up the left, given the very strong opposition that the Indigenous movement had to the former Correa government, because of its policies against such demands such as care for nature, bilingual education, Indigenous justice, and its neglect of the countryside and its persecution of Indigenous leaders, which generated internal divisions and weakened the movement. Its patriarchal and conservative character also distanced it from the women's movement, which criticized its actions and policies to the detriment of this sector, such as the veto of the proposal to decriminalize abortion, the imposition of pro-life representatives in programmes of sexual education, etc. On the other hand, some of the leaders of the Correa movement, especially Rafael Correa himself, do not want such unity, because they criticise the Indigenous leaders for being opportunists, and for playing into the hands of the right.

It is important to understand, therefore, that the Indigenous movement is not homogenous. There are indeed sectors with right-wing and other opportunist leaderships, which have become institutionalized, just as there are within the Correa movement. But the enormous difference is that the Indigenous movement is a grassroots process going back decades, which in the 1990s and now, acted as the spearhead of the social struggle, and which has again become the umbrella under which all forces and achievements of the popular struggle can gather. Not to grasp this would be a terrible mistake by the left in Ecuador.

The underlying difference is between distinct projects, distinct models of development. The Parliament of the Peoples, which emerged from the October mobilizations, and which at the beginning included Correa supporters, clearly expressed its opposition to a neoliberal, extractivist project, and for the defense of the rights of the people and nature. However, a good part of the Correa leadership maintains an extractivist vision, although this has been combined with social policies.

It should also be said that the October days were marked by a high degree of coercion and repression carried out by the Moreno government, with human rights violations that were confirmed by the IACHR and the UN in their subsequent reports. Indigenous leaders, and some figures of the Correa movement (who still have popular support) have suffered persecution, in an attempt to weaken their capacity for action, and in particular the government is seeking to undermine possible electoral candidates such as Iza or Vargas, because of the respect and visibility they won through the mobilizations. Currently the government is strengthening the police and armed forces, using the pretext of preserving peace against vandalism, a discourse that is being strengthened with the support of the media.

2. The situation of the left in Ecuador

After the protests of October 2019, it is the social left that has managed to strengthen its support and its proposals. For the moment, these have focused around the proposals of the Indigenous movement, in opposition to the government of Lenin Moreno and seeking the withdrawal of the package of neoliberal measures promoted by business sectors, under pressure from the IMF and the U.S. government. The same is not true of the political left, whether in the form of Popular Unity, the Socialist Party or Pachakutik, which at the beginning of the current government gave it their "critical support", justifying their action with an anti-Correa discourse.

The Indigenous movement, and its main actor, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), exceeded all expectations at the beginning of the October rebellion and put in question the

legitimacy not only of the neoliberal measures but also that of the government, which had been promoting a business agenda backed by the right-wing parties and the business associations that benefited. It allowed at re-awakening of its grassroots, which had been battered and weakened by the interference of Correa's populism. Its new and young leadership proved capable of confronting the onslaught of the government's repressive forces, as well as the joint action of the right-wing parties and the media. It organized its communities to descend on the city of Quito, and win the support of other social sectors and the population in general. The gains of this important struggle open up the possibility of an Indigenous candidate for the presidential elections of 2021, with a high level of acceptance among both Indigenous and mestizo sections of the population.

Behind the neoliberal measures there were other factors that encouraged widespread protest. The weight of classist, patriarchal, xenophobic and racist structures came to the fore with redoubled force. Poverty and inequality combined with the specific frustrations of many sectors. Among these, young students, mostly university students, played an important role in the different fronts of popular resistance, either by occupying the front lines and confronting the repressive apparatus, or by providing humanitarian solidarity, setting up a variety of logistical support centres (to supply medicine, clothing, food), or providing medical aid to the wounded and those affected by the violent action of the police and the military. The creativity of these young people, from the universities and the communities, was seen in various forms of resistance (from making shields and setting up relief brigades, to songs and soup kitchens, etc.). This action of the youth was partly spontaneous, but also drew on a variety of existing organizations (student bodies, neighborhood and cultural movements, etc.)

The organized women's movement played a fundamental role. Its protest actions had been more frequent in recent years, both with Correa and Moreno. The issue of therapeutic abortion, the cases of femicide, the different forms of violence against women, the government's policies and backward discourse on women's issues, led to a series of mobilisations by different women's organisations. In October, their presence in the final phase brought together a diversity of groups and campaigns to extend the popular struggle against the neoliberal model, and to strengthen their own demands.

The workers' movement, which has been weakened since the 1980s, and which suffered further erosion as a result both of actions by the Correa government and of errors by its own leaders and organizations, also took part in the great October mobilization, and contributed to the popular mobilization as its protest actions advanced. But the trade unions revealed their shortcomings when it came to coordinating joint actions, showing how little the movement has been renewed and how weak it is for future political struggles.

Finally, an urban community movement, partly spontaneous and partly organized, joined the other sectors in the protests, and along with ecologists, LGBTI, traders, indigenous migrants and so on, made possible this partial victory of a social left that brought together its different forces to block the neoliberal attack by Lenin Moreno's government.

This process of struggle converged in the setting up of the Peoples' Parliament and the Women's Parliament, which united diverse sectors and organizations in a clear stand against the neoliberal project, extractivism and against the interference of the IMF. At present, there are still itinerant parliaments in different provinces of the country and the women's parliament.

The same thing did not happen within the ranks of the left parties, of what remains of these political fronts, since their role and purpose in Ecuadorean political life is in deep crisis. The Ecuadorean Socialist Party (PSE), following its role in the Alianza País (AP) governments, first of Correa and then of Moreno, is split in three, further undermining its already weakened political presence. One group, as a sympathizers of Rafael Correa, left the government and plays a part in the opposition. Another remains in the ranks of AP, occupying different government posts, and selling its left-wing credentials at a high price. While a third group, and perhaps the most numerous, remains in the ranks of socialism (Renovación Socialista) under the historic leaders (Enrique Ayala, Victor Granda, among others). Their links with Moreno's government and their role in the October days diminished even further their discredited presence in the ranks of the Ecuadorean left.

The Stalinist left of the PCMLE, formerly appearing as the Popular Democratic Movement (MPD), and now as Popular Unity (UP), was one of the sectors most affected by the Correa government. In fact, its student and teacher unions were divided and were on the verge of disappearing. But in spite of the persecution it suffered, it was able to survive, along with its electoral base, through a forced alliance with Moreno at the beginning of his mandate, based on an anti-Correa discourse. The UP maintained a significant presence in the October days, even with its weakened bases, and currently supports the presidential candidacy coming out of the Indigenous movement. This is a sector that has always been criticized within the left for its vertical, sectarian and opportunistic positions.

The Pachakutik Movement has still not emerged from the crisis that began with the forced alliance with Lucio Gutiérrez (2002-2003), and which later deepened with the series of errors of its different leaderships and the weakness of its organizational work at the grassroots, a consequence of centering its political project entirely on elections. In October, its weak forces played a role alongside the bases of CONAIE and other campesino and Indigenous movements. Like other political organizations of the left, it has expressed opposition to a possible alliance with the Correa movement.

3. The women's and feminist movement

Among other things, October 2019 showed that the capital/life contradiction is very much the order of the day. The mobilization against the elimination of fuel subsidies occurred mainly because people felt that their living conditions would be affected, particularly the most vulnerable sections of the population, who have been bearing the burden of the economic crisis that the country is going through, and especially women who carry the main load of the social reproduction of life on their shoulders.

The struggles went beyond the traditional capital/labour conflict. For many months, women had been demanding from the State the recognition of their rights, especially to a life without violence, mainly because of the increase in complaints of harassment, sexual violation and femicide. In Ecuador every 71 hours a woman dies as a result of sexist violence. Ecuador is one of the countries with the highest rates of teenage mothers in the region, many as a result of rape. Every 4 minutes a woman has an abortion, yet the National Assembly denied the possibility of abortion in cases of rape, forcing girls to have children, even by their own fathers. Abortion is one of the main causes of maternal death.

Historically, this violence has been naturalized, and it has combined with the structural violence of the patriarchal, colonial state, which is present in everyday life, especially for women, children and adolescents: their bodies are subject to the these multiple forms of sexual and gender violence, ethnic violence, class violence, adult-centric violence and heteronormative violence. A structural violence, which insists on treating women's lives as mere reproducers of a new workforce for capital.

The repression of the macho, patriarchal state has been expressed not only through the criminalization of protest, but also in budget cuts for social policies; cuts in programmes for the prevention of gender violence, with the closure of institutions responsible for the care of victims of violence; cuts in the health sector, with massive layoffs of administrative and medical staff, among others. These cuts in social services mean costs and care are transferred to families, especially to women, who are forced to look for sources of income, under precarious conditions, through informal work, with an excessive workload. This is how precarious lives are produced: with violence, the exploitation of bodies, and a reduction in rights.

The recent growth of feminism in Ecuador has come hand in hand with the activism of young women, mainly against male violence and femicide. The fight for the decriminalization of abortion is one of the main struggles around which various women's organizations converge at the national level, and as part of a regional struggle in Latin America. However, women's struggles have been present on a number of other fronts, and include the demands of different social sectors: the defence of land and water, against extractive industries, unemployment, poverty, xenophobia and for freedom of movement, for the reestablishment of bilingual schools, for equal access to land, for social security, for access to quality healthcare, and for care policies, etc.

In October, the women's movement was present in all its different social expressions: Indigenous women, Black women, youth, students, urban women, peasant women, girls and boys accompanying their mothers. It reached its strongest expression in the march for peace, which called for an end to the heavy repression during the ten days of protests. October allowed for unity between the struggle of the spontaneous social movement and the feminist movement. And although not everyone shares everyone else's struggles, all or most of us felt the need to unite and combine our discontent with the system. The positive "conclusion" has been the creation of the Popular Women's Parliament, which is still a process in its infancy, as well as the reactivation of collective spaces of encounter between women, recognizing the diversity of struggles in each territory.

4. The ecological struggle in the Amazon

The Ecuadorean Amazon has been, continuously and for decades, an epicenter of socio-environmental conflicts. These have been over the extraction of oil, mining, the advance of the agricultural frontier and other constant attacks against the Indigenous nationalities that live in the region. Socio-environmental conflicts are growing due to the contamination of river water through the misuse of natural goods, the lack of public policies and adequate infrastructure in the cities of the Amazon, and ignorance of alternative practices for processing garbage and transforming solid and liquid waste, etc.

There is an almost total absence of support for the Amazon from the current government. After the Correa government, almost no progress has been made in support for the communities and population of the Amazon. Rather, the neglect has increased, even though the resources that contribute most to Ecuador's GDP come from the Amazon rainforest. It should be noted that Correa's government deepened extractive policies in the country, and the Moreno government is continuing this. Chinese mining companies continue to operate in the area, and even have concessions in areas of high biodiversity and with very important ecosystems.

Given this constant deterioration of biodiversity, the Amazonian nationalities, women's organizations and farmers' organizations, are organising constantly to struggle against extractivism. In 2019 and 2020, the Waorani, Shuar and Kichwa peoples have been fighting to defend water (the case of the defence of Paitua River), to stop oil extraction (the case of the Waorani, whose legal action succeeded in stopping the exploitation of new oil fields in Orellana), and against mining (the case of Napo Province).

However, due to the economic crisis

and the weakening of public policies, some of the population accept and partly support the extractivist projects, in the hope of finding work and obtaining some kind of benefit through "development" programmes promised in the communities. However, these programmes are in many cases set to be run by the same government institutions, and there is no guarantee that they will really be executed in the areas affected by extractivism.

The Capitalist Pandemic, Coronavirus and the Economic Crisis

20 March 2020, by Éric Toussaint

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A public health crisis

The coronavirus pandemic is a serious public health problem and the human suffering caused by the spread of this virus will be enormous. If it massively affects countries of the Global South with very fragile public health systems that have been undermined by 40 years of neo-liberal policies, the death toll will be very high. We must not forget the critical situation of the Iranian population, victim of the blockade imposed by Washington, a blockade that includes medicines and medical equipment.

> The mainstream media and governments focus on the differences in mortality rates according to age, but they very carefully avoid any reference to class differences and how mortality, due to the coronavirus pandemic, will affect human beings according to their income and wealth

Under the pretext of necessary fiscal austerity to repay public debt, governments and major multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and regional banks such as the African Development Bank have everywhere enforced policies that have deteriorated public health systems: job cuts in the health sector, precarious employment contracts, reduction of hospital beds, closure of local health centres, increase of health care costs and of prices of medicines, under-investment in infrastructure and equipment, privatization of various health sectors, under-investment by the public sector in research and development of treatments for the benefit of the interests of large private pharmaceutical groups…

This is true in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and in the countries of the former Eastern bloc (Russia and other former republics of the former USSR, Central and Eastern Europe).

Nevertheless, this obviously also concerns European countries such as Italy, France or Greece. Moreover, in the United States, where 89 million people have no real health coverage, which Bernie Sanders sharply indicts, what will happen?

The mainstream media and governments focus on the differences in mortality rates according to age, but they very carefully avoid any reference to class differences and how mortality, due to the coronavirus pandemic, will affect human beings according to their income and wealth, and therefore, to the social class to which they belong. Quarantine and access to intensive care for people who are 70+ are very different whether you are rich or poor.

There will also be a divide between the countries that have, despite neoliberal policies, maintained their public health systems better than others and those that have gone furthest in undermining the quality of public health services.

The stock market and financial crisis

> The coronavirus is the spark or trigger of the stock market crisis, not the cause

While the mainstream media and governments constantly claim that the stock market crisis is caused by the coronavirus pandemic, I have stressed that all the elements of a new financial crisis have been in place for several years and that the coronavirus is the spark or trigger of the stock market crisis, not the cause (‘No, the coronavirus is not responsible for the fall of stock prices’). Although some people viewed this as an attempt to deny the importance of the Coronavirus, I stand by my assertion. The financial sphere has been replete with huge amounts of flammable agent for several years and it was obvious that a spark could and would cause the explosion: we were not sure about the exact time and the cause, but we knew it would come. So something had to be done to prevent it that was never done. Many authors of the radical left announced this crisis, including Michael Roberts https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/, François Chesnais https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois_Chesnais and Michel Husson http://hussonet.free.fr/english.htm . Since 2017, I have, also, regularly written on the subject (see ‘Dancing on the Volcano’ in November 2017; ‘Sooner or later, there will be a new financial crisis’ dating from April

2018). With CADTM and others we have affirmed that a radical break with capitalism is necessary.

A first major stock market shock occurred in December 2018 in Wall Street and under pressure from a handful of large private banks and the Donald Trump Administration, the U.S. Federal Reserve began cutting rates again and was applauded by those few large private firms that dominate the financial markets. The frenzy of rising stock market values picked up again, and large corporations continued to buy back their own shares at the stock market to amplify the phenomenon. Taking advantage of the fall in interest rates, large private companies increased their debt and large investment funds have increased their buyouts of all kinds of companies, including industrial companies, by resorting to debt ('The mountain of corporate debt will be the seed of the next financial crisis' published in April 2019).

> A first major stock market shock occurred in December 2018 in Wall Street, then a major liquidity crisis in September 2019

Then, once again in Wall Street from September 2019, there was a very big liquidity crisis in a financial market that was nevertheless saturated with liquidity. A liquidity crisis when there is a profusion of liquidity is just an apparent paradox as I explained in 'The Credit Crunch is Back and the Federal Reserve Panics on an Ocean of Debt' published on September 25, 2019 and in 'Another look at the Federal Reserve's panic in September 2019 and solutions to the crisis' published on October 11, 2019. It was a serious crisis and the Federal Reserve intervened massively, injecting hundreds of billions of dollars in total to try to prevent the markets from collapsing. It also kept on its balance sheet more than $1.3 trillion in toxic structured products (MBS) that it had bought from banks in 2008 and 2009 because it was rightly convinced that had those been put in the secondary debt market, their prices would collapse and lead to a major financial crisis and bank failures. The Fed did this not to defend the general interests of the population, but to safeguard the interests of big business, i.e. the richest 1% of society. The ECB and the other major central banks (UK, Japan, Switzerland, China…) have applied roughly the same kind of policy and they bear a very important responsibility for the accumulation of flammable agents in the financial sphere (see my article in March 2019 'The Economic Crisis and the Central Banks').

> There has been a huge increase in the creation of fictitious capital and in every financial crisis a large part of this fictitious capital has to "disappear" because it is part of the normal functioning of the capitalist system

There has been a huge increase in the creation of fictitious capital and in every financial crisis a large part of this fictitious capital has to "disappear" because it is part of the normal functioning of the capitalist system. Fictitious capital is a form of capital that develops exclusively in the financial sphere without any real link with production. It is fictitious in the sense that it is not directly based on material production and the direct exploitation of human labour and nature. As the French economist, member of ATTAC, Jean-Marie Harribey says: "*Bubbles burst when the gap between realized value and promised value becomes too great and some speculators understand that promises of profitable liquidation cannot be honoured for all, in other words, when financial capital gains can never be realized for the lack of sufficient surplus value in production*". Jean-Marie Harribey, "La baudruche du capital fictif, lecture du Capital fictif de Cédric Durand", *Les Possibles*, N° 6 - Printemps 2015: https://france.attac.org/nos-publications/les-possibles/numero-6-printemps-2015/debats/article/la-baudruche-du-capital-fictif

I reiterate that the coronavirus pandemic is not the real and deep-rooted cause of the stock market crisis that erupted in the last week of February 2020 and is still continuing. This pandemic is the detonator, the spark. Serious events of a different nature could have constituted that spark or trigger, such as the outbreak of a war between Washington and Iran or direct US military intervention in Venezuela. The ensuing stock market crisis would have been attributed to the war and its consequences. Similarly, I would have said that this war, the consequences of which would be very serious, no doubt about this, would have been the spark and not the root cause. So even if there is an undeniable link between the two phenomena (the stock market crisis and the coronavirus pandemic), this does not mean that we should not condemn the simplistic and manipulative explanations which put all the blame on the back of coronavirus. This mystifying explanation is a trick designed to divert the attention of public opinion (of the 99%) from the role played by policies in the interest of big business on a planetary scale and the complicity of the governments in place.

The crisis in the production sector preceded the coronavirus pandemic

That's not all. Not only had the financial crisis been latent for several years - the continued rise in financial asset prices was a very clear indicator of this - but a crisis in the production sector had begun long before the Covid19 virus spread in December 2019, before the closure of factories in China in January 2020 and before the stock market crisis at the end of February 2020.

The year 2019 saw the start of a crisis of overproduction of goods, particularly in the car industry, with a massive drop in automobile sales in China, India, Germany, Great Britain and other countries. This has led to a reduction in automobile production.

There was also overproduction in the German manufacturing sector for machine tools and other industrial equipment, one of the world's top 3 producers in this sector. There was a very sharp reduction in Chinese industrial growth, which had serious consequences for countries exporting equipment, automobiles and raw materials to China. In the second half of 2019, a recession began in the manufacturing sector in Germany, Italy, Japan, South Africa, Argentina, etc. as well as in several manufacturing sectors in the United States.

The evolution of the financial and economic crisis since 3 March 2020

> During the last week of February 2020, the world's major stock exchanges experienced a very significant drop of between 9.5% and 12%, the worst week since October 2008

Let us remember that during the last week of February 2020, the world's major stock exchanges (in the Americas, Europe and Asia) experienced a very significant drop of between 9.5% and 12%, the worst week since October 2008.

I'm picking up where I left off on March 4, 2020 'No, the coronavirus is not responsible for the fall of stock prices' the day after the U.S. Federal Reserve, the Fed, decided to lower its key interest rate by 0.5%.

Central banks as pyromaniac firefighters

On March 3, 2020, the Fed decided to set its key rate within a range of 1% to 1.25%, a cut of 0.50%, which is the largest in recent years since so far the Fed had been cutting its rate by 0.25%. Faced with the continued plummeting of the stock markets and in particular bank stocks that are on the verge of bankruptcy, the Fed decided to make a further cut on 15 March 2020, hitting even harder than 3 March. This time, it lowered its rate by 1%. Therefore, since March 15, the Fed's new key interest rate has been in a range of 0 to 0.25%. Banks are therefore encouraged to increase debt.

The Fed not only lowered interest rates, it started to inject a huge amount of dollars into the interbank market again because banks, once again, no longer trust each other and are reluctant to lend money to each other. The Fed chairman said that the Fed has planned to inject more than $1 trillion of liquidity into short-term markets in the coming weeks, including the *repo market*, where it has already intervened massively between September and December 2019. The *repo* market [