



IV544 - May 2020

For lessons in protest during the pandemic, look to Latin America

31 May 2020, by **Iain Bruce**

Last week, Brazil moved into second place in the world league table of Covid-19 cases with almost 375,000 confirmed infections – 12,000 more than Russia. The World Health Organization said Latin America was emerging as a new epicentre of the pandemic. Other counts give Chile the highest number of cases per capita, and Ecuador the highest death rate per capita. Peru and Mexico are also on a sharp curve upwards.

We know all of these comparisons are flawed, based on varying and inadequate levels of testing. A study by the University of Pelotas in southern Brazil, based on interviews and tests carried out through the third week of May, indicated that the real number of people infected across the country was probably seven times the officially confirmed figure. Yet the intensity of the conflict over Coronavirus in several Latin American countries is now unparalleled.

Some of the political narrative is familiar, if more extreme. In Brazil, a blustering, right-wing populist leader (some would call him a neo-fascist), along with his coterie of far-right, conspiracy-theorist advisers and ministers, is under fire from the conservative establishment and traditional media for openly flouting and undermining lockdown restrictions, as well as for trying to

appoint a family friend to head the Federal Police in order to protect his sons from being investigated over their possible involvement in the murder of a radical left councilwoman and gay rights campaigner, Marielle Franco, in 2018. Over the weekend, it came close to a coup.

The soldier in charge of President Jair Bolsonaro's security cabinet, General Augusto Heleno, threatened the Supreme Court with grave, but unspecified, consequences if it went ahead and investigated the president's mobile phone records. In response, the Court published a much commented-upon video of Bolsonaro and his education minister swearing at the court and threatening to lock up the judges if he didn't get his way.

But there is another difference, which the international media have barely reported; the level of resistance from the Left. For all the indignation of Brazil's traditional liberals and conservatives, it is members of congress from the Left – from the Party of Socialism and Liberty (PSOL) and the Workers' Party (PT) – who have taken the lead in launching a demand for the impeachment of President Bolsonaro. 400 social movements backed the move. Similar action is now being taken against the education minister and General Heleno for their additional threats to

Brazil's democratic institutions. All these actions build on the momentum of daily pot-banging protests by tens of thousands of Brazilians from their doors, windows and balconies against the government's response to the pandemic.

In Chile and Ecuador, two countries that saw huge strikes and protests against neoliberal policies from last October, social movements have, literally, taken a step further.

The protests in Chile never completely stopped. In recent days, they have gathered pace again in the working-class neighbourhoods of Santiago to demand more help for those suffering hunger as a result of the lockdown. In Ecuador's capital, Quito, students held an initial march, with careful social distancing, on 5 May, after the government announced it would be cutting 10 per cent or more from the budgets of public universities, apparently in order to continue making payments on the country's foreign debt. More protests followed; a court declared the cuts unconstitutional, and President Lenin Moreno partially backed down.

Nevertheless, days later, his government presented a series of new austerity measures: massive cuts in public spending, including 25 per cent reductions in hours and wages, the

elimination of many employment rights and the privatization of half a dozen public companies, among them the post office and the national railway. Again, the aim was "to protect Ecuador's access to international credit" - in other words pay its debt in line with its commitments to the International Monetary Fund.

Students, trade unions and other movements, including the main

Indigenous movement, Conaie, warned that there could be "another October", and called for a day of protests this last Monday. The day before, President Moreno's state of the nation address to parliament was met with a barrage of pot-banging across the country. On Monday, thousands turned out in Quito and other cities, again with face masks and a careful distance between each protester. In fact, it was the police who did not respect social distancing,

as they charged protesters in the historic centre of Quito, using tear gas and truncheons.

The role of Ecuador's Indigenous movement will be key to the future of this movement - and that movement may have lessons for those around the world struggling to protest their governments in a time of quarantine.

27 May 2020

Source: Commonweal

We Can't Breathe: Rebellion against Racist Police Violence

30 May 2020, by Solidarity National Committee

As the grim statistics of sickness and death have emerged over the last few weeks and months from the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become clear that people of color have been the principal victims of the health crisis. George Floyd's murder reminds us that police brutality has not been quarantined during the pandemic. "Jogging While Black" and "Birding While Black"

Back in February, Ahmaud Arbery a young Black man was jogging near his home near Brunswick, Georgia when three white vigilantes, including an ex-cop accosted him while, they claim, attempting to make a "citizen's arrest." One shot him three times with a shotgun while another stood by with a drawn handgun. It wasn't until video coverage of the incident taken by a third white civilian participant that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation finally stepped in and arrested first two and then the third vigilante. The local good old boy network that allowed the vigilantes to remain uncharged for weeks recalls the murder of civil rights activists Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner by local vigilantes and police officers in Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964.

Only a few days before George Floyd

was killed, a video surfaced showing a white woman in New York's central park responding to a request by a black bird watcher to leash her dog in accordance with park regulations by threatening to call the police and tell them that her life was "being threatened by an African American man." The woman and her would-be Black victim shared more than the coincidence of a common last name: both understood whose word would be accepted by police, prosecutors and the mainstream press in the event that she made such a charge. In a chilling irony, the incident took place in the same park that five Black men the "Central Park Five", were falsely accused, convicted, and jailed of raping and beating a white female investment banker in 1989. The shameless exploitation of this ugly fact of race and gender in US society by a privileged white person is an outrage in itself that could only have added to the timber box of outrage that erupted in Minneapolis. About the same time, Breonna Taylor, a Black health worker was shot to death in her bed in Louisville, Kentucky by cops executing a warrant at the wrong address. The murder of Arbery, Floyd and the recent Central Park cases might never have been brought to wide public attention had they not been video

recorded.

George Floyd's recorded pleas of "I can't breathe" are painfully reminiscent of the police murder of Eric Garner by New York city police in 2014. Vigilante lynching with local cop participation, the readiness of whites to use their privilege to call the police against Blacks for the slightest imagined offense including their very presence, and the umpteenth cop killing of an unarmed Black person are examples of only some of the treatment that Black people have come to expect in the US.

The political climate that encourages this is stoked by a president who openly flirts with the most racist and reactionary forces in the country with the tacit complicity of one of the parties that rule us and the hollow dissent and ineffectuality of the other. The Fire This Time

Every few years spates of violence against African Americans reach the point that outpourings of grief and anger are expressed in uprisings accompanied by burnings of cities and looting of stores. The Watts section of Los Angeles saw a rebellion after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, as did Los Angeles following the acquittal of the

cops who beat Rodney King in 1991.

The burning of a Minneapolis police precinct and the temporary abandonment of the surrounding streets to the protestors has considerable symbolic importance. Police headquarters in communities of color are constant reminders that the police are an occupying force rather than a source of public safety. Protestors danced in the shadow of the flames consuming Minneapolis police station #3, a physical symbol of their oppression. For a few hours the streets belonged to the people who lived there.

We can expect the usual chorus of pious head shaking and finger wagging from liberal and conservative mouthpieces lamenting how the damage caused by the uprising will only hurt the Black community itself. This too is a cover up. Urban uprisings

are the result, not the cause of the dire conditions of life faced by Blacks and other people of color in racially segregated US cities. Decades of redlining, capital flight, residential segregation, and other features of racial capitalism have long rendered many Black neighborhoods jobless centers of despair, violence, and official neglect, while white downtown and residential areas have flourished thanks to private capital infusion and public funding and wealthier white areas enjoyed well-funded schools and neighborhood safety.

While the embers of precinct #3 smolder so does the anger of a community that simply can no longer breathe. The rebellions are a cry for the oxygen of social and racial justice. Just as the sources of exploitation, oppression and state and vigilante violence experienced by African Americans over the last four hundred

years run deep and wide, the solutions too are vast. They begin with holding the state accountable for the violence committed by police and prosecuting vigilantes emboldened by the politicians who rule us. Addressing the broad issues of Black oppression however, will require deep structural changes such as the dismantling of the racist criminal justice and prison systems and a redistribution of wealth that could involve various forms of reparations for the crimes of slavery that have been discussed in progressive circles. In 1963, Black novelist James Baldwin titled his reflections on racial oppression *The Fire Next Time*. The fire has come and only a reordering of US society will quell the flames of protest that it has produced.

31 May 2020

Source [Solidarity](#).

Big Protest in Hong Kong Greeted the News about Tabling National Security Law

30 May 2020, by **Au Loong-Yu**

This kind of scene occurred multiple times last year, during the anti-China Extradition bill movement. But since the Chinese New Year 2020, I had not seen this again for the past five months.

With the onset of the pandemic the Carrie Lam government had imposed a lock down law and banned public gathering with over eight persons.

The news that Beijing is going to impose such law on Hong Kong now angered many people, especially the young, however. Today they came to protests.

The police at first tried to deter people from gathering by making some arrests. But it failed.

Some time after 1 pm thousands of protesters occupied the main street. They were mainly young. Our small group of comrades joined them to protest.

But the police soon fire tear gas to stop the crowd to grow even bigger.

We all ran and retreated into side streets. Soon the protesters spread out to other areas and occupied the streets there, briefly. A kind of cat and mouse game repeated again and again in the busy shopping areas in Hong Kong Island. Eventually at least 120 people were arrested.

I know many protesters felt satisfied

in the end of the day despite the arrest — “we continue to defy your ban and your evil law!”

When I began my journal back home I noticed a video was crazily shared on facebook.

This was about a policeman rushed through the door of a convenient shop, grapped a bottle of water, and then just left without ever paying. Lots of people mocked the policeman with remarks like “pay!” or “arrest him!”

The police eventually posted a statement saying that they had paid the shop owner on behalf of the policeman. I am delighted that the police were embarrassed.

Sunday 24 May 2020

The Necropolitics of Heroism

29 May 2020, by **Gediminas Lesutis, Jon Las Heras**

In the current context of the pandemic, in which the politics of life and heroism are at its most visible, we ought to ask why at a time of crisis some workers become heroes and others do not. What is actually achieved through this differentiation of lives and professions, between those worthy of a hero's name and those who are not, in both public and political discourses that have been activated at the time of the Covid-19 crisis? [1]

When we recognize someone's act as heroic, we actively differentiate between that person and ourselves, the rest, the non-heroes. Such heroic type of action goes beyond presupposed normal ways of behaving when securing one's well-being; instead, it implies a great deal of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. In the current moment, to be heroic is to be selfless—it is to take risks, to expose oneself to the coronavirus in order to save others.

However, when such behavior is generalized, then the heroic dimensions lose their mythic powers and instead become mundane. In other words, if all of us are heroes, then none of us are heroes at all. Therefore, in our neoliberal competition-based society, the name of a hero is evoked, or supported, by the political class when it is necessary to obscure the existing forms of power and exploitation, praising some workers and systematically forgetting the rest. We currently see this with the public and political glorification of frontline healthcare workers, and further marginalization of other frontline workers, including farm laborers, cleaning staff, shop floor staff, garbage men, or delivery drivers.

In this text, we argue that instead of engaging in the discourse of heroism, in the current moment of crisis it is important to reconsider our economic,

social, and political lives in a more inclusive, participatory, and solidaristic manner. This requires immediate and direct engagement with political and economic systems that structure our personal and working lives in order to transcend individual gestures such as public clapping campaigns. Let us explain.

'Heroes' of our time

Calling frontline healthcare workers heroes—and thereby glorifying the sacrifice they are currently making in our collective fight against the coronavirus—obscures the broader political context of the current situation. What is it that makes their sacrifice particularly extraordinary: is it the basic medical supplies such as protective personal equipment that are missing, or their long working hours? [2] Is it retired staff or students stepping in to fill the widening gaps in the National Health System? [3]

Focusing on the "heroism" of such actions, however, we lose sight of the broader context and the systemic political neglect of national health and social security systems. In the UK, in the last decade of inhumane austerity politics, the National Health System has faced an enormous political assault and continuous budget cuts imposed by the Conservative Government. This political disdain for healthcare workers was made abundantly clear when the Secretary of State for the Home Department Priti Patel, in her insidious mission of rearranging national emigration rules, publicly described frontline healthcare work as non-skilled. [4] What Patel did not say but implied was that these workers are superfluous, and that for the UK to elevate its global competitiveness standards, health workers should be recorded with the

liabilities, not with the assets.

Ironically, this rhetoric changed drastically with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The Prime Minister of the Conservative Party that time and time again cursed the NHS—and even happily applauded the Parliament's decision not to increase wages for nurses [5]—now, having recovered from the coronavirus that left him hospitalized in the intensive care unit, admits that he "owes his life to NHS." [6] In fact, the moment could have not been more opportune to focus on the heroism of the NHS in order to forget the politically-constituted setting that makes the work of frontline healthcare workers appear heroic.

Similarly, even the majority of the British public that election after election has bestowed executive powers on the Tories—and thus also voted for the systemic assault on the NHS—is also readily endorsing the heroism of healthcare workers. In spite all that we have not done to protect them, healthcare workers are our heroes now. Today, in the midst of a global pandemic, the vitality of their work is something we can all grasp. We easily feel our own vulnerability to the virus and thus we can clearly see the link between us and these healthcare workers and how fundamental they are for us to persist, even more so under the dire conditions we as a society have generated for them to tackle the pandemic. The least we can do now is applaud them to show our appreciation—particularly on Thursday night when the nation is supposed to come together and feel unity in our collective fight against the coronavirus. Those not participating will be named and shamed for failing to participate in this public appreciation of the sacrifice. [7]

Unfortunately, our collective cheering helps very little to the exhausted

healthcare workers. Endorsing their heroism in the fight against the coronavirus, we are actually praising them for persevering despite their dangerous work environments and conditions. They are not doing anything wrong—their efforts are truly admirable—but their actual work, as well as personal lives, are not likely to be improved if we do not fiercely confront current economic policy making. However, this so far has not been addressed in the public discourse. Instead, names and photographs, brief life stories of those NHS workers fallen in our collective fight start to appear in the media. [8] It is the coronavirus that killed them and not policies towards fiscal austerity and privatization of healthcare pushed forward by the Conservative Government. The sacrifice of few is justified for the well-being of all. The public opinion seems to have been that, if this is to happen again, we shall be fine—we have a devoted army of hospital workers that, no matter what, will relentlessly care for us. This is the egotistic sacrifice of the few so that all can remain the same, unmoved.

“Non-heroes of Our Time”

On the other hand, the so-called “Eastern Europeans,” flown from their countries with fewer COVID-19 cases in order to secure the continuous agricultural production in Western Europe in exchange for minimum wages, are not deemed worthy of public attention. They are not heroic. It is not their vocation, nobility of their profession, or the vitality of their technical skill that makes them chose the jobs that they undertake. In the economic and political context of Europe, in which transnational migrant worker networks are necessary for the profitability and sustainability of the agro-food industry, they have very little choice but to go into this undervalued work out of economic necessity. [9] Their sacrifice is not driven by collective need to overcome a crisis but by individual despair. [10]

Common sense tells us that picking vegetables is not something that

requires a specific skill. On the contrary, jobs that need the physical capacity to perform manual farm labor could be easily done by many currently furloughed British citizens. However, even in the time of crisis, there is little willingness to do it—there are others who will undertake these jobs. The Brits who, somewhat willing to do this work, express their shock about the working conditions offered to them. [11] However, the shock is not that some workers such as migrants have no choice but accept such working conditions; instead, the issue is that British workers need better—after all, they are not poor migrant laborers. Although never stated explicitly, this, however, implies that the lives of these people are less significant than those of the British public—because they are just “Eastern Europeans” and the general British public can easily forget the fact that they will be doing this farm labor in spite of the pandemic. And they can die doing it, because they are already non-living—nameless, nation-less bodies flown into our country in charter planes—and settled in distant and “safely” supervised lodgings. They get the money that they came for and we eat their produce, what is wrong with that?

If we took our eyes away from their monetary compensation, we would see these “Eastern European” workers that travel at the time when the skies have gone quiet, are doing something extraordinary—they are coming to save us from our own complacency of exploitation rampant in agro-business and a lack of will to make a sacrifice. It is not just them; it is also other frontline workers—cleaning staff, shop floor staff, garbage men, or delivery drivers – that are equally forced to work under dangerous conditions, but are not clapped for.

However, calling farm or other essential workers heroes might be a wrong noun all together. Just like the NHS workers, “Eastern Europeans” are not heroes. There is nothing heroic about involuntarily putting of one’s life in danger in order to ameliorate conditions created by neoliberal regimes that thrive off of disposable lives. In other words, in neoliberal societies where

governments have systematically eroded labor conditions, all precarious frontline workers—in fact, all workers—have to endure different forms of exploitative working conditions. And because we are all exposed to these dynamics, we cannot glorify these conditions. Therefore, none of us are heroes—for there is nothing extraordinary in our struggle to earn a better life. It is just a mundane coping with the systemic conditions that aim to make our lives less and less livable.

Therefore, in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic and multiple challenges that it presents to our societies, rather than embracing the language of heroism—that is instrumental in obscuring relationship of social and political exploitation—publicly and individually, as thinkers and workers, we ought to think about deeper relations that systems of power obscure us from seeing. Rather than just clapping for those workers who are being sacrificed to fill the gaps created by political decisions, we need to build a collective memory that is not subsumed to the interests of the political class that does not want us to recognize each other as exploited by the same neoliberal logic. We ought to reflect on how these symbolic actions serve the interests of the political elites and the divisions they create. In other words, there needs to be mobilization against political glorification of workers exploitation and sacrifice. What could this mean in practice?

Opposite to passive forms of ambiguous solidarity, more active and inclusive ways of intervention would imply supporting and engaging in new methods of collective action that reflect upon and take advantage from the political contradictions that the COVID-19 has brought to the fore. During the pandemic, a wave of strikes has occurred across the globe and yet we remain uninformed about their potential lessons: that some workers have not bought into hegemonic discourses of heroism that push them to risk their personal safety under poorly conditioned spaces of their professional activity.

In the case of healthcare workers, for

example, the most salient case has probably been that of 4,000 nurses in Papua Guinea who protested against their government for not taking adequate measures to tackle the pandemic effectively. [12] Similar struggles have taken place in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Bangladesh, or Pittsburgh in the US and threats to walk out have occurred in such places as Medway in the UK, Hong Kong in China and Jakarta in Indonesia. [13] These cases highlight a collective refusal to follow a political idealization of healthcare workers as blind heroes, and further exposes the contradictions of neoliberal discourses that treat them simultaneously as national martyrs and wage-workers whose working conditions are only an accounting cost. Their struggles pose a pertinent question to the rest of the population: would you be willing to clap for those workers who decline to save our lives because they want to preserve theirs?

The answer is that we should not just clap for them but actively support them in their struggle for better working conditions and a better life. The current moment of crisis opens a repertoire of active solidarity with our peer workers-citizens and lays it bare that we need to extend solidarity networks to tackle the pandemic beyond the healthcare sector. Understanding the condition of healthcare workers not as unique but as systemic in neoliberal societies we should ask ourselves if we are secured too, and whether our employers have made sure that our lives are not recklessly being put into danger in order to secure corporate activity. As we have seen in other contexts, this sort of direct challenge to neoliberal treatment of the pandemic has also produced a wave of strikes in shipping and logistic companies like Amazon, private and transport workers, industrial or manufacturing sites. [14] If we are not in such conditions, we can still think of the ways to support other workers that we know have been endangered, like supermarket workers, shop assistants, street cleaners and so on, and condemn managers publicly or even legally for their abuses.

The current pandemic and the lockdowns have generalized

precariousness and tens of millions of workers risk being laid off. A conscious and solidaristic action would not allow governments to implement neoliberal policies that embrace individual-based measures of risk management; instead, we must advance pro-labor policies that revert the worrying unemployment, inequality and poverty rates that the current neoliberal crisis management is spiking across the world. [15] Therefore, in the first instance, leftist political parties and social movements should press parliaments and the executive, if not widely denouncing them all together, to pass labor laws that set limits to how corporations may dismiss their workers under the incoming economic crises and establish procedures to, in case it was required, temporarily halt the employment contract so that after the lockdown labor rights are secured as much as possible. [16]

Second, during the pandemic (and thereafter) all workers who have lost their wages, or those who have been permanently laid off, should be provided unemployment benefits, or any sort of basic income. The latter might resemble a policy that the social democratic alliance between PSOE and Podemos are currently considering of passing in Spain. [17] Though these measures are not enough, they at least point in the right direction: we should socialize the economic impact and ensure that solidarity goes beyond vacuous public performances of appreciation and leads to real and effective political intervention. Progressive fiscal policies are possible only with a heightened coordination between governments, central banks and other governments so that potential inflationary spikes are spread among as many national territories as possible. Such international coordination seems to start taking shape between Spain, France, Italy, and Portugal that demand a more cohesive fiscal and monetary policy to the European Monetary Union to avoid “extinction.” [18]

At a more radical level, the COVID-19 crisis, although deeply painful, presents us with an historical opportunity to challenge the ongoing gendered and racialised divisions of

labor that devalue social reproductive labor including—but not limited to—healthcare work. In this context, we need to politicize the conditions and rewards in which these labors are undertaken delinking them from monetary evaluations, fostering the articulation of computation system in which basic needs and scarce resources match, and promote their rotation in an inclusive and consensual basis. [19] In order to know the value of other tasks in the reproduction of life, for example, civil servants that have less workload due to Artificial Intelligence induced economies of scale, could be transferred and asked to engage in caring activities for people in need, supporting precarious staff at the workplace (e.g. cleaners, security, cooking personnel), or engaging in the promotion of new formative and supportive activities with unemployed and marginalized citizens who have difficulties to survive to the labor market. This could also be applied to other sectors, so that we can enhance democratic and solidaristic values of our society. Of course, this must emerge only after important debates at the workplace, in different sectors, at national, regional, and international scales. But the underlying ethics points towards a question we ought to consider as human beings living in capitalism: how could we behave and participate in a society in different ways so that we prioritize diversity rather than specialization, increasing the chances to understand and live like the Other.

In the current moment of social and political rupture—particularly when the name of a hero is evoked and supported by the political class in order to obscure the existing forms of power and exploitation in our neoliberal societies—we ought to be vigilant not to split our society into heroes, those who are not worthy of that name, and the rest of us clapping for some but not for other frontline workers. Because we should not praise the political sacrifice that the name of a hero masks, and instead cheer a dignified life that we all deserve to have and all of those, from healthcare to farm workers, who, consciously or not, strive to make it happen.

18 May 2020

Jair Bolsonaro is a threat to Brazil and global health

28 May 2020

In Brazil, widespread testing is absent and the underreporting of cases is distressing. Meanwhile, the health system is collapsing due a shortage of beds, intensive care units, and medical supplies. Health professionals on the frontlines in the war against the virus suffer from a lack of equipment and are working exhausting hours to save lives. The number of health workers who are infected or who have died is alarming.

And governmental emergency aid of just over \$100 a month for three months distributed to the most vulnerable sectors is being paid late and leaving many people out, while forcing those who do receive it to wait in endless lines at the banks.

The health and economic crisis facing the Brazilian people - who are suffering the sixth highest Covid-19 death toll on the planet, making us the epicenter of the pandemic in Latin America - is not due to "natural causes." It is the product of a deliberate policy by President Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro is a coronavirus denialist and an authoritarian, he has led a crusade against science since taking office and constantly attacks the necessity of social distancing. Bolsonaro, together with an important sector of Brazilian elites, advocates "healthy markets" at the expense of public health. They are taking advantage of the situation to increasingly close down democratic spaces, increase deforestation in the Amazon, and invade and threaten indigenous nations, leaving them exposed to the virus. They attack education, culture, and science, cutting the resources necessary for their sustenance and development.

Bolsonaro's politics and posture put our national health at risk, but they also constitute a threat to global health. Several countries are already beginning to organize a kind of cordon sanitaire around Brazil, which may deepen the crisis still more. Therefore, the authors of this letter have filed impeachment petitions against Bolsonaro. To date, there are approximately thirty such petitions from different sectors of society which are increasingly gaining support from artists, intellectuals, social movements, and well-known personalities. Bolsonaro isolates himself politically and institutionally with every statement he makes and each action he takes, leading him to harden his extreme right-wing base and venture even further down an authoritarian path in conflict with democracy and the Brazilian Constitution.

An editorial published on May 9 by one of the world's leading medical scientific journals, The Lancet, warns that "perhaps the biggest threat to the response to Covid-19 in Brazil is its president, Jair Bolsonaro." The article concludes, "Bolsonaro needs to change his course drastically or he will have to be the next to go."

We, the undersigned from across the world, denounce Jair Bolsonaro and the genocidal policies he is enacting against his people. Of all heads of state, he is the most criminally reckless and represents a danger to world health.

#ForsBolsonaro

Initiative by PSOL congresspersons
FERNANDA MELCHIONNA,

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Gripezinha - the little flu: neofascist Bolsonaro in the face of the pandemic

28 May 2020, by **Michael Löwy**

The case of Brazil is therefore special, because Bolsonaro, the head of the Government, persists in his attitude of denial, characterizing the coronavirus as a "little flu": a definition that deserves to be included in the annals, not of medicine, but of political madness. But this madness has its logic, which is the logic of neofascism.

Neofascism is not a repetition of fascism in the 1930s: it is a new phenomenon, with characteristics of the 21st century. For example, it does not take the form of a police dictatorship, but respects some democratic forms: elections, party pluralism, freedom of the press, existence of a Parliament, etc. Naturally, it tries, as far as possible, to limit these democratic freedoms as much as it is able with authoritarian and repressive measures. Nor does it rely on armed shock troops, such as the German SS or the Italian Fascists.

This is also true for Bolsonaro: he is neither Hitler nor Mussolini, and he does not even have as his reference point the Brazilian version of fascism in the 1930s, Plínio Salgado's integralism. While classic fascism defended massive State intervention in the economy, Bolsonaro's neo-fascism is fully identified with neoliberalism, and aims to impose a socioeconomic policy favorable to the oligarchy, without any of the "social" pretensions of ancient fascism.

One of the results of this fundamentalist version of neoliberalism is the dismantling of the Brazilian public health service (SUS), which was already quite weakened by the policies of previous governments. In these conditions, the health crisis

resulting from the coronavirus could have tragic consequences for the poorest sections of the population.

Another characteristic of Brazilian neo-fascism is that, despite its ultranationalist and patriotic rhetoric, it is completely subordinate to American imperialism, from an economic, diplomatic, political and military point of view. This also manifested itself in the reaction to the coronavirus, when Bolsonaro and his ministers were seen to imitate Donald Trump, blaming the Chinese for the epidemic. What Bolsonaro has in common with classical fascism is authoritarianism, a preference for dictatorial forms of government, the cult of the Chief ("Myth") Saviour of the nation, hatred of the left and the workers' movement. But he is unable to organize a mass party or uniform shock troops. Nor is he able, for the time being, to establish a fascist dictatorship, a totalitarian state, closing Parliament and putting unions and opposition parties outside the law.

Bolsonaro's authoritarianism is manifested in his "way of dealing" with the epidemic, trying to impose, against the Assembly, against state governments, and against his own ministers, a blind policy of refusing the minimum sanitary measures, indispensable to try to limit the dramatic consequences of the crisis (lockdown, etc.). His attitude also has traces of social-Darwinism (typical of fascism): the survival of the strongest. If thousands of vulnerable people - elderly people with weak health conditions - die, it is the price to pay: "Brazil cannot stop!"

A specific aspect of Bolsonarist neo-

fascism is obscurantism, contempt for science, in alliance with its unconditional supporters, the most backward sectors of Evangelical neo-Pentecostalism. This attitude, worthy of Flat Earth Theory, has no equivalent in other authoritarian regimes, even those whose ideology is religious fundamentalism (ISIS!). Max Weber distinguished religion, based on ethical principles, and magic, the belief in the priest's supernatural powers. In the case of Bolsonaro and his neo-Pentecostal pastors friends (Silas Malafaia, Edir Macedo, etc.) it is really about magic or superstition: stopping the Pandemic with "prayers" and "fasts".

Although Bolsonaro has not been able to impose his lethal program as a whole, a part of it - for example, an easing of restrictions - may impose itself, through the President's unpredictable negotiations with his military or civilian ministers.

Despite the delusional behavior of the sinister character currently installed in the Palácio da Alvorada (Presidential Palace), and the threat he poses to public health, a significant portion of the Brazilian population still supports him, to a greater or lesser extent. According to recent polls, 17% of voters who voted for him regretted their vote; and a majority of the population is opposed to him being removed from his role.

The struggle of the left and the Brazilian popular forces against neo-fascism is still in its infancy; it will take more than a few nice pot protests to defeat this teratological political formation. Okay, sooner or later the Brazilian people will break free from

this neo-fascist nightmare. But what will be the price to pay until then?

On April 2nd Bolsonaro made a significant statement: "70% of the population will be contaminated by Covid-19, this is inevitable". Of course, following the logic of "herd immunity" (initially proposed by Trump and Boris Johnson, later abandoned), this could perhaps happen. But it would only be "inevitable" if Bolsonaro managed to impose his policy of refusing

containment measures: "Brazil cannot stop".

What would be the consequences? The death rate of Covid 19 in Brazil is currently 7% of those infected. A small arithmetic calculation would lead to the following conclusion: 1) If 70% of the Brazilian population were contaminated, it would be 140 million people. 2) 7% of mortality of 140 million is about 10 million. 3) If Bolsonaro managed to impose his

policy, the result would be 10 million Brazilians dead.

This is called, in the language of international law, genocide. For an equivalent crime, several Nazi dignitaries were sentenced to hang by the Nuremberg Tribunal.

Source [Global Ecosocialist Network](https://www.globalsocialistnetwork.org/21/gripenzinha-the-little-flu-neofascist-bolsonaro-in-the-face-of-the-pandemic/)./21/gripenzinha-the-little-flu-neofascist-bolsonaro-in-the-face-of-the-pandemic/

The "extremely risky gamble" of reopening schools in Switzerland

27 May 2020, by **Raphaël Ramuz**

What is your assessment of the methods implemented by the Confederation and the Cantons for distance education?

We can discuss the details of such and such concrete choices, but the most instructive in this process is what it reveals. On the one hand, distance education cannot be equivalent to the educational institution. With its qualities and its faults, the school is not reduced to the transmission of a stock of knowledge, it includes a set of social ties which go far beyond the teacher-pupil relationship and participate in the education of children.

On the other hand, it is a powerful indicator of and multiplier of inequalities. First, it presupposes a material infrastructure: computer, software, connection, possibility of isolation and so on. However, this infrastructure is very unevenly distributed. In this regard, an assessment will have to be made, but the situation is even more problematic than what could have been predicted. Second, it involves a technical knowledge base that neither teachers nor students (nor their parents) are supposed to have and which further exacerbates inequalities.

What do you think of the Federal Council's decision to reopen schools on 11 May?

In order to avoid false debates, it should be recalled that the SSP is in favour of reopening as quickly as possible. We have emphasized sufficiently all the limits and socio-educational dangers of confinement and distance education for this to be clear. But the central question is not so much that of the resumption date as that of the health and educational conditions thereof. The position of the Federal Council on the health issue is very worrying.

Currently the only elements formulated by the Federal Council are that children are neither carriers nor transmitters of the virus and that the wearing of masks is not useful. These claims are clearly abusive in the state of scientific knowledge on the issue. On the other hand, they are functional with a rapid and extensive resumption of production and consumption activities. Indeed, the main obstacle to the resumption of economic activity is childcare. If they are not affected by the virus, they can go back to school and parents can work. The current position of the Federal Council is an extremely risky health gamble, far removed from the precautionary

principle necessary in such cases.

In terms of health, what are the prerequisites for resuming classroom teaching?

Without going into details (the SSP made detailed demands on its website), these conditions must be based on a clear and objective analysis of the medical situation, the specifics of the school as a meeting place (age of children, size of classes and common areas, type of contacts and staff and so on) and on the application of the precautionary principle when there are doubts.

It should not be forgotten that the school involves not only teachers and students, but a multitude of other professionals. For all these people (children and adults), the health rules defined on robust scientific criteria must apply.

And on the educational level?

The stakes are very high. Emphasis should be placed on reconnecting with the students, allowing everyone to connect to the group and work together again, starting from very different social and psychological situations. This socio-educational effort must accompany immediate recovery, but it will also guide the

following school year and will require additional resources.

What could be the impact of this period on the development and education of students?

On the positive side, this could make it possible to reconsider the “digital mode” and underline the importance of the social bond in all its dimensions. This could also help overcome the

confusion between, on the one hand, the omnipresence of digital “leisure”, which is an end in itself promoted by the industry of the sector and, on the other hand, the mastery of digital as professional and educational tool. We have experienced all the problems posed by turnkey solutions in this industry in terms of data protection, property rights and so on. And this shows the need, for schools and public

services in general, to acquire their own digital tools independent of the digital giants.

Of course, as in any process of this kind, there will be a struggle for the interpretation of what this experience and has been and what should be concluded from it. We have to prepare for this from now on.

30 April 2020

Don't despair, organise!

26 May 2020, by Veronica Fagan

But for those of us on the Labour left there were points of potential demoralisation before C-19 dominated the political horizon. For almost five years, since Corbyn's election as Labour leader we had the goal of electing a left Labour government at Westminster. That dream was at least postponed for the foreseeable future when the Tories won in December 2019. The situation in Scotland is clearly different, but we don't have the space to go into that here.

Socialist Resistance argued that there were particular factors that operated in the Tories favour during the December 2019 General Election - allowing them to fight that campaign on the territory of 'Getting Brexit Done' and whipping up further English nationalism, racism and xenophobia to put extra wind in their sails.

But that doesn't mean we don't recognise that the defeat and the subsequent - and inevitable - resignation of Corbyn wasn't a blow.

Then we had the Labour leadership, deputy leadership and National Executive Committee (NEC) elections from January until April. Sadly Rebecca Long-Bailey's campaign could only be described as lacklustre but at least as big a contribution to Starmer's success came from the fact that a significant number of people who had previously backed Corbyn

supported him. These were by and large people who moved left to support Corbyn but faced with December's defeat retreated back to where they had been before.

So there was a coalition within Labour responsible for that defeat: between those who had consistently organised against Corbyn and his team and people who had believed that the left had proved it was unelectable (completely forgetting that it was Blair and Brown who bequeathed us this stretch of Tory rule).

The third major blow to the morale of the Labour left came the week after Starmer's election with the publication of the leaked report on Labour's treatment of alleged antisemitism. This report revealed a depth of manipulation against the left leadership, combined with a level of misogyny racism and bullying that was literally breathtaking.

And then there is the response of the new Starmer leadership, elected on promises to stick to much of Corbyn's programme but moving rapidly to the right, not only on policy (backtracking on support for renters and on solidarity with the people of Kashmir, to name but two) but even more critically on responding to the report and on internal democracy.

In any other workplace someone against whom there appears to be

evidence of gross misconduct would be suspended pending investigation. And people have been expelled from the party on virtually no evidence - as the report itself demonstrates.

Lift the Labour Party lockdown

But Starmer has not only left those still working in Labour's HQ in Southside untouched, but as we understand it has not taken action against anyone in terms of party membership, but has imposed a lockdown of the Labour Party at a local level to block any democratic response.

Of course it's absolutely right at the current time that there should not be any physical Labour Party meetings - or of trade unions or campaigns. But without any reasons being given, local party officers have been informed that while 'informal' online meetings can take place, no political decisions can be taken.

This is unacceptable. Parliament at Westminster and the devolved nations are meeting largely virtually, as are select committees of MPs as is Labour's National Executive Committee. We are in a huge national crisis given both the pandemic and the Tory response. The leaked report is the biggest scandal inside the Labour

Party for a very long time – and one which particularly seriously threatens the long term support for Labour in Black communities.

It's true that there may be people potentially excluded from virtual local meetings because they don't have the tech, though the mobile phone is virtually universal and capable of being used for such meetings. But many are regularly excluded from standard physical meetings because they are shift workers, carers or by reason of impairment. In the long term we should combine both physical and virtual forms of organising – in the short term we say: lift the Labour Party lockdown!

Balance of forces

Given all this, it is understandable that many are questioning their Labour Party membership and a not inconsiderable number are leaving now. The overall balance of forces is currently certainly poor within the Labour Party – but where is it better?

There is need to step up the fight against racism – particularly when C-19 has a disproportionate impact on Black communities and when the number of racist attacks is increasing at the same time.

There are some green shoots in terms of workers organising for the PPE they need, against lifting the lockdown in a way that privileges their profits over our lives. The NEU teachers' union and the transport unions are not surprisingly particularly vocal at the minute in the face of the government's moves yesterday to restart English Schools without adequate safety.

There are also wide discussions about what constitutes essential work. There is the flourishing of impressively dense mutual aid groups across communities.

It's certainly the case that the left as a whole, including the Labour left, needs to work around these issues and give trade union and community organising greater priority. But doing these things is not hampered by being Labour Party members, but strengthened.

In some cases the local relationship of forces means we can bring speakers for such struggles into local parties, while in others the collective connections will be more effectively made through left caucuses. That can improve the balance of forces inside local parties and put pressure on the leadership – but equally vitally increase the support for those vital struggles.

The dynamic to leave the Party now is to some extent a product in some people's illusions in Corbyn. It was almost as if he had the magic wand and could make everything better, with their role being limited to social media. It's difficult not to feel irritated by people asking what the Labour Party has to offer them individually as if it were a supermarket.

On the other hand those of us with more political experience failed to do sufficient to challenge those views through formal or informal political education and by actually linking local parties to those struggles, however few, that were going on in our communities, whether over climate change, universal credit or anything else. Now the Labour left needs to find ways of remaining connected with as many as possible of those we can't persuade not to leave – otherwise the danger of people dropping out all together will only increase.

It's true that Corbyn's leadership gave a real possibility of a left Labour government which could have brought big improvements to millions of people's lives. It's true that there remains a big audience for left ideas and campaigns within the biggest political party in Europe. But the most fundamental reason for socialists to be inside the Labour Party is its historic and strategic importance to working class struggle, particularly the linkage with unions which we want to deepen (and democratise)

Organising the left locally and nationally

The bedrock of left organising in the Labour Party needs to be what

happens locally. Even with virtual meetings, far more people engage with what's going on in their immediate area – and that's even more the case when meetings are physical.

Corbyn's time as Labour leader brought us Momentum which was a hugely contradictory experience. Momentum was the way that lots of young people in particular related to Labour. It was the banner under which many new local left groups were launched or re-launched initially. Welsh Labour Grassroots became the banner under which Momentum organised in Wales and does so in a more democratic way.

Momentum's other particular strength was that it did mobilise people around elections and marginal constituencies in a way many official structure failed to. And we know from the leaked report that it was the cancer at the heart of Labour HQ that played a significant hidden role in preventing Corbyn getting to Number 10 in 2017. But there were problems with Momentum from the beginning. For reasons that seem counterintuitive, the new left wing Labour leadership backed it being set up as a company and there was never any real internal democracy. Political education was sporadic and apart from 'The World Transformed' festivals at Labour conference, which Momentum spawned, it was very much left to local initiative despite the fact that it had was a substantial national apparatus.

On the question of the witchhunt generally and antisemitism particularly, there was also a major problem from the beginning. While some local Momentum groups took a different approach on some or all occasions, Momentum nationally always conceded far too much to those who claimed Labour was institutionally antisemitic and that Corbyn was the problem. This then became part of the pressure on the Labour leadership to do likewise. This was a serious error as we in SR consistently argued.

At the same time a series of 'single issue' campaigns were launched during this period, most notably Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL), Red Green Labour (and later Labour for a

Green New Deal), Labour Women Leading but also Red Labour, Labour against the Witchhunt, Labour against Austerity and more latterly the Socialist Campaign group of Labour Councillors. Some of these challenged existing organisations which had a problematic orientation such as the Jewish Labour Movement for JVL or Labour Women's Network, while on the environment, the left networks were able to organise to get Labour Party conference in 2019 to back a Green New Deal, bypassing the more longstanding but conservative SERA affiliate to a large extent.

There was one particular weakness in this regard on the question of Black self-organisation Support for Black Sections was a key signature for the Bennite left in the 1980s. Grassroots Black Left was set up in around 2018 but remains relatively weak and unrepresentative. The issue has not been prioritised by the left as a whole in the way it should have been. This leaves us less ability to respond either to the vile racism in the report or to the way Black Communities are being particularly hard hit both to the virus itself and the Tories policies in response,

During this period, there was also an attempt at Labour left collaboration to put forward a common slate for the constituency places on the National Executive committee elected by the entire membership. The Centre Left Grass Roots Alliance had started many years before Corbyn became leader, with the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy at its centre. It then expanded to include Momentum and latterly a number of other organisations

There have always been big problems with how that organisation decided

anything – which was by consensus, in effect a veto by some. This meant both the new JVL and GBL groups were kept out of the process for some considerable time and only included after big fights, but the ultimate decision making process still didn't change. By the time of the last NEC by elections earlier in 2020, Momentum had gone their own way effectively gifting those seats to the right.

How to reform this process effectively would be a topic for a separate article but it should be realised that even if the left takes all the constituency member-elected places, that would not give a left majority on the NEC as some places are in the gift of the leader – and therefore currently filled by our opponents -while others represent the affiliated trade unions and to that extent are rather more balanced.

Moving forward

In the period since Corbyn stood down there have been a number of new initiatives including the relaunch of the Socialist Campaign group of Labour MPs under the leadership of Richard Burgon and the development of new connections and co-ordination between Black members such as the Last Straw call organised by left NEC member Huda Elmi attended by over 500 members – the majority of whom were Black.

There have also been new moves to challenge the national leadership of Momentum with the launch of Forward Momentum and Momentum International. While we wish those organisations well, SR is not of the view that it is possible to reform Momentum. We see an increasing number of local groups who previously

used the label Momentum adopting instead more inclusive names such as X Labour Left, which we think better represent a model for local organising.

A new national co-ordination, Don't Leave Organise (DLO), has been recently launched. This came out of collaboration between JVL, Red Labour, and the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) during the NEC by-elections campaign and the associated suspensions, including the importantly successful push to reinstate Jo Bird as a candidate. One of the notable things about DLO is that it has already won the backing of two important left trade unions, the Bakers and the FBU. It has long been a problem across large swathes of the Labour left that they only focus of what's going on in constituency parties and ignore the issue of the affiliated unions. That's been one of the distinctive aspects of the LRC and now of Don't Leave Organise.

We would urge readers in England and Wales who are in the Labour Party both to sign up to Don't Leave Organise individually and where possible to get any local Labour left groups you are involved in to sign up, as well as any single issue Labour campaign groups you participate in. And in the meantime continue to do what you can to give voice to the anger that clearly exists against this Tory government which undoubtedly has blood on its hands, to use the contradictory opportunities that exist to develop broader political discussion and get (more) involved in trade union campaigns and in community organising through mutual aid.

Source **Socialist Resistance**-><https://socialistresistance.org/dont-despair-organise/19954>].

The coronavirus and the coming crises in Morocco

The hospital system has gone through a process of reduced investment, declining equipment, dilapidated facilities and hygienic conditions, and closing down of services, to the benefit of private clinics. Access to care is “paid for”, patients often have to buy the basic equipment themselves or “pay” so as not to remain on the waiting list indefinitely. The current system is not, in any case, in a position to cope with an even moderate spread of infections. The government spokesperson had first put forward the figure of 250 intensive care beds (for a population of 35 million inhabitants) before correcting it upwards (1,640, of which a third are in the private sector). [20]

It was in this context that the epidemic appeared in Morocco. Ten days after the first case of Covid-19 appeared on 4 March, the borders and the schools were closed, and lockdown was declared on 20 March, at the same time as the state of health emergency. [21] To date (17 May), the official balance sheet has recorded 6,798 cases of infection, 3,645 healings and 192 deaths. [22] The authorities reacted mainly with a financial and social aspect and, at the same time, a health and repressive aspect.

The financial and social aspects

This was mainly reflected in the creation of a “Special fund dedicated to the management of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic”, the objective of which would be to ensure “the financing of measures to combat the coronavirus, upgrade the medical apparatus and support the economy through measures to be proposed by the Economic Watch Committee (CVE) created for this purpose.” In addition to the general state budget, the fund will also benefit from the contribution of several bodies and institutions. [23] The latest estimates noted a fund equivalent to three billion euros. This

CVE is composed of eight members of the government, Bank Al Maghrib (BAM), the Professional Grouping of Banks in Morocco (GPBM), the CGEM (employers’ union) and the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and services and that of the craft chambers. Thus some wealthy people and senior officials are responsible for deciding the fate of millions of “vulnerable” households. Among the main measures that have been taken: the suspension of payment of “social security charges”, the establishment of a moratorium on the repayment of bank loans to companies and the postponement of tax deadlines. Likewise, contributions from different companies have been qualified as a donation bearing “the character of accounting charges deductible from the tax result”.

Other measures have concerned the population at large: the payment of an allowance of 2,000 dirhams (180 euros) for those forced into technical unemployment, provided that they are declared to the National Social Security Fund, in the knowledge that the number of declared employees is extremely low. [24] For the other categories, the aid specifies, in particular for those who were registered with RAMEL at the end of December 2019, “800 dirhams (72 euros) for households of two people or less, 1,000 dirhams (90 euros) for households of three to four people, 1,200 dirhams (108 euros) for households of more than four”. [25] As for those who are immersed in total invisibility, benefiting neither from the National Social Security Fund, nor from RAMEL, nearly 46% of the active population does not benefit from any medical cover, “the same amounts would be granted gradually through an electronic platform dedicated to the filing of declarations”.

What comes through explicitly can be summed up in a few points:

a) the management of the fund is not in the hands of the government, which is completely divested of responsibility, reflecting the absolute

nature of a regime which in times of crisis does not even bother with its democratic facade.

b) the priority given to maintaining the interests of big companies. Beyond the use of the sums collected in the Fund, the El Othmani government has approved the exceeding of the ceiling for external borrowing for 2020. A decision followed immediately by a request addressed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), requesting activation of the “Precautionary and Liquidity Line”. This is equivalent to almost three billion dollars, approved by the IMF board on 17 December 2018. It is not intended for the health crisis.

c) the lack of transparency on arbitration and the allocation of the dedicated budget. How much will go specifically to the health sector? Based on what criteria?

d) the cyclical nature of financial aid ignoring longer-term budgetary measures and the need for a “budget planning law” to rebuild an efficient health system.

e) the continuation of austerity policies demanded in the name of the national priority of fighting the epidemic: freezing of careers, promotions and hiring, “non-strategic budgets”, but also, a direct drawing down on civil servant salaries (corresponding to three working days), including retirees. This drawing down involves no specific taxation of large fortunes and effectively exempts employers. It is about the financing by the lower social categories of the failures of public health policies while companies are helped out through the crisis. For some, public charity, mass layoffs, wage cuts, compulsory drawing down, for others, all the aid possible to compensate for the drop in profits. It’s basically the application of the old principle of “socialization of losses”.

“Social policy” comes down to a logic of public charity. What does the sum of 1,200 dirhams represent for

households of four or more? Not to mention the delays in verification of requests by local authorities, with a real risk of arbitrariness. According to existing data, the number of employees declared to the Social Security and on sick leave would be 578,208, but this figure should increase significantly. For those with RAMEd cards, if we base ourselves on the documentation of the 2020 finance law, the people concerned would represent 5.49 million households or 14.4 million beneficiaries. On the other hand, we do not know the exact number of those who hold RAMEd cards valid as of 31 December 2019, one of the conditions for benefiting from the aid.

For the “without RAMEd,” the task of identification is even more difficult. Based on data from the High Commission for Planning, this category of informal workers and undeclared employees (artisans, day workers, street vendors, couriers, caretakers, home helpers, construction workers or those in agriculture and so on) could be up to five million people. Note that more than a month after lockdown, when the tranche of the second instalment should have started since 7 May, many people have received no “first” instalment, or even the derisory “food baskets”. Whether beneficiaries of Ramed or not, they constitute the heart of the informal survival economy and more than 91% of them are in a situation of absolute poverty.

On lockdown

This financial and “social” component is combined with measures aimed at lockdown of the population, but which prove contradictory and problematic for several reasons:

- The popular sectors live from a “mobile economy” and from daily work. This involves significant geographic mobility of people towards markets of all kinds, movement of goods according to opportunities, informal connections from different places and people. This resourceful economy based on different modes of circulation is embedded in social practices where social life and subsistence markets are well

established. This form of economy was brutally halted by lockdown which paralysed all forms of movement.

- Similarly, the conditions of spatial proximity or overcrowded housing in working-class neighbourhoods constitute a limit to the effectiveness of a lockdown policy. The virus was first transmitted in specific neighbourhoods and within family cells.

- The idea of stopping production in all non-essential sectors was rejected. Thus, call centre, factories, construction sites, the mining complex, large-scale agricultural operations, administrative sectors which concentrate hundreds or thousands of employees without providing any means of protection or doing so belatedly or in an ineffective and sufficient manner, are continuing to function. [26] Thus, a few weeks ago, a hundred workers were infected in a relocated French factory producing paramedical equipment in the Casa region, but this is also the case in textile factories, call centres, supermarkets (Fez, Tangier, Marrakech, Tétouan and other places), canning factories (Larache, Safi, Kenitra), wiring factories (Kenitra and elsewhere). Each week there is a new case. The more time passes, the more it appears that the main foci to come will crystallize in factories and workplaces. Despite the existence of a government control commission aimed at verifying the compliance of companies with health requirements, the latter are rarely observed, the despotic organization of work and the forms of super-exploitation imposed do not coexist well with the principle of worker safety. This situation generates specific workers’ resistance: demands to be tested before resuming work, or for sanitary measures adapted to working conditions. There is a contradiction between the requirement of lockdown, which is supposed to concern them and the compulsion, under pain of being dismissed or not paid, of continuing work.

Health policies conducted under a

state of emergency

Authorities are counting on having deployed an early containment policy. The official discourse is reassuring, suggesting that the epidemic is under control, that the peak is almost reached, that what is needed has been done, but the more time passes, the more it appears that there is no control over the dynamics of contagion which are to some degree of unknown, given the weakness of the tests. The slowing down of the epidemic does not mean the disappearance of the virus. Throughout this period, the main order was to stay at home, with a security incentive and the Ministry of the Interior’s specific logistics. Lockdown is limited to an order to be executed solely because it is ordered by the state. If elsewhere caregivers are applauded, in Morocco people are asked to applaud the police and to sing the national anthem, without success.

It is not only a question of convincing and doing educational work, but also of answering the specific social questions that a lockdown policy can generate over time, and in particular the loss of resources for significant sectors of population and living conditions in popular housing. The fact, moreover, that the call for lockdown was accompanied by a punitive approach or aimed at the destruction of itinerant carts or established informal souks reveals the permanence of the war against the poor, much more than the fight against the virus. [27] The evacuation of the informal markets and the prohibition of the occupation of the public domain, registered for several years on the state agenda, are systematized.

In the range of means used, the state has chosen to develop the compulsory wearing of masks. The Minister of Industry said that Morocco now produces more than eight million a day. The real need is much higher due to travel needs and knowing that the masks in question have a limited use in time (3-4 hours). [28] Beyond the controversy over the level of protection offered, and their compliance with international

standards, many have testified to the difficulty of obtaining them, while the ten pack batches contain defective prototypes. [29]

This situation favours a private criminal trade: several thousand masks considered to be reliable (FFP2) were sold to various hospital centres and turned out to be fakes, at the risk of the health of the nursing staff, while masks that have not received any validation have been circulated. There is speculation on basic food prices, creating another lucrative market. What is revealed here is firstly the absence of long-established public control over the production and distribution processes of basic medical equipment, the absence of stocks meeting needs, the predatory logic which reigns. This shortage situation, real or constructed, leads to use of the same mask to avoid sanctions, when traveling, with the risk of promoting new chains of contamination.

The authorities have also announced an order for 100,000 “rapid screening” tests to expand early detection (currently around 2,000 per day). Their acquisition remains to be verified given the supply difficulties. In any event, this is more like an extension of the possibilities of screening, mainly in big cities, for contacts of people who contracted the virus, but below a policy that would allow a broader diagnosis. In addition, the government plans to trace the Covid-19 by a specific application as has been experienced elsewhere. The risk is that this software is used for other uses, to trace citizens rather than viruses, especially since it is the Ministry of the Interior which will be the owner, the Ministry of Health being only the temporary user of the system.

The first impression that emerges is the predominance of a communication discourse aimed at suggesting that the responses made to the health emergency situation are in themselves sufficient, appropriate and guaranteeing control of the situation. The crisis does not exist. It is neither social, nor political, nor at the health level. Everything is managed. This idyllic vision valuing the security state does not fit well with reality, because

in reality the epidemic is a heterodox enemy: it feeds, without fighting, on the flaws of the system: the type of housing and urbanization, the absence of a health system rooted in needs, dependence on the global drug market, equipment, the massive reality of logics of survival that make the street the only space for accommodation with precarity, despotism in the workplaces.

These are the limits of state actions carried out under a security logic. [30] One can only be struck by the severity of the sanctions in the event of non-compliance with lockdown in working-class neighbourhoods and the nonchalance with which businesses, prisons and supermarkets are treated, which do not employ any sanitary rules. [31] You don't fight a virus in the same way as social and political opposition. Even less, through a semblance of proactive policy where what is announced is more important than what is achieved. Without having the possibility of independently verifying the veracity of the figures, put forward at all levels. And above all, even in the event of control, this gives no absolute certainty on possible developments, as the factors of propagation of the virus are multiple and complex, in particular in an inevitable context of emergence from lockdown, whatever the scenarios envisaged.

Identifying the political issue of the conjuncture

We cannot accept that lockdown is synonymous with an atomization of social ties, *de facto* abandonment and increased impoverishment of a large part of the population; nor the framework by which the state intends to strengthen austerity policies and tighten its grip on society. We cannot ignore the fact that the issue of the health crisis is fraught with political issues. And that it combines with other crises. For the state, it is a question of managing the tension between the continuing accumulation of austerity policies and, on the other hand, the control of society and the risk of having its legitimacy shattered

in the event of expansion of the epidemic. This tension is accentuated by several major factors:

a) the dilapidated reality of “public health” can no longer be avoided. Little by little, the public sees the gap between the announcements made and experience, the social differences faced with the epidemic. We are not all equal in the face of the virus. And the vaunted “success” of local mask production cannot ignore the shortage of everything else. There is no exit from lockdown scenario that carries zero risk and the conditions mentioned throughout this article suggest that the possibility of a health catastrophe in the long term cannot be excluded, beyond the bluster of today. Not to mention the ordinary victims of untreated diseases during this entire period when we could the patients being almost left to their own devices.

b) the certainty of a recession with deeper consequences than that of 2008. The shrinking of the eurozone markets, Morocco's main trading partner, the fall in local and foreign investment, tourism income and contributions from Moroccan nationals abroad, are warning signs, the consequences of which will unfold on a social fabric torn apart by decades of austerity policies and multiple social and territorial inequalities. The impoverishment that accompanies the health crisis risks combining in the short and medium terms with the consequences of the global crisis and an explosion in mass unemployment. Thus, 57% of businesses are on temporary shutdown and 6,300 have ceased activity, while an equally considerable proportion has seen a marked drop in activity. At the end of April, more than 900,000 employees were recorded at a standstill. In the tourism sector alone, the impact on employment could potentially affect 500,000 people, but in reality no sector is spared.

c) because of the policy of lockdown in the big cities, a disorganization of the food distribution channels has already had a direct impact on the countryside and the “useless Morocco”. In addition, this year of drought, according to forecasts, will result in a fall of 50% in wheat production,

implying a significant increase in imports, when the country is already highly dependent on basic foodstuffs. We cannot exclude a fall in exports at the international level, an increased risk of shortages, a new surge in prices on the world market which will have a strong impact on foreign exchange reserves, the balance of payments and the purchasing power of the masses.

The strategy of the regime is to cement the discourse of national unity by promoting the centrality of the monarchy, while implementing a strategy aimed at opposing employees, sectors of the middle class, the popular categories of the informal economy, those who benefit from a social security system, those who are excluded or are registered in a specific scheme. This division itself is based on and encourages a logic of survival which aims to ensure that everyone expresses their claims in an atomized manner.

While it appears that the main victims are the prisoners, the unemployed, workers in factories and fields, the poor who have known nothing but poverty, daily workers, migrants,

single mothers, in short the popular classes who will have to pay the "exceptional" and "structural" costs for a rescue of local capitalism. The health crisis is depoliticized by the terms of technocracy and security management, from day to day, so that illness, death and distress remain questions without political relevance. However, the regime cannot hide the expansion of the sources of contamination in the factories, nor impose long-term lockdown on the basis of public charity. The risk is that the wave, even stabilized, spreads out over time, with all the unknowns of the exit from lockdown. The authorities must juggle between maintaining their legitimacy and the logic of the employers and the predatory caste who aim for a short term resumption of "economic activity".

In the meantime, we experience the procedures of curfew, the partitioning of space, the rehabilitation of the old habits of despotism where the Ministry of the Interior openly governs the fabric of daily social life, the trivialization of repression, police impunity, the implementation of new

surveillance technologies, the supervision of low democratic margins, the criminalization of resistance and freedom of expression. [32] As if the regime has taken its revenge for recent years when the most diverse social movements have started to cross the "red lines". The deployment of armoured vehicles in large cities sends a message to society, faced with fairly foreseeable social and political risks, in the event of a real epidemic wave, or when, more definitely, the social reality of the economic crisis and impoverishment can no longer be "confined".

The social, political and health crises will explode in the coming period. It is up to social movements, to radical forces, to create the social and democratic axes of a fight for the conquest of fundamental rights and freedom, here and now, from an emancipatory perspective. The post-corona is taking shape today. The challenge is to prepare our social camp for the refusal to return to normality and for the social and political convulsions to come.

19 May 2020

Women's labour and C-19

24 May 2020, by Susan Pashkoff

Women's traditional labour

The idea (and insistence of the ruling class) that traditional women's labour is an unskilled form of labour has been clearly demonstrated to be false. Traditional women's labour of cooking, cleaning, caring for our immediate and extended families, nursing, educating and socialisation of our young quite clearly requires a multitude of skills. Moreover, it is the labour that essentially holds our societies together. In its absence, essential work and tasks in the societies in which we live simply will

not be done. ?Since this labour is done at home for no pay, it is assumed that anyone is capable of doing it and the skills required are in abundance. ?The fact that this labour is done at home for free saves the capitalist economy a nice bit of money; if they actually had to pay for this labour, profits would, of necessity, fall. That portion of socially necessary labour time that constitutes work done at home (caring for the family - childcare, care of the sick and elderly, the maintenance of family life; cooking and feeding the family, cleaning the family home, basic education of children) falls outside the costs of capitalists as they only cover paid labour as wages.

This type of labour is often consumed immediately; laundry gets done, food is consumed (leftovers are always eaten), caring for the family is done, the house is cleaned and while it is constant, those tasks do not produce extra goods and services beyond that which is needed for their immediate production and consumption. Women's oppression may appear individual and personal at home; but this labour is actually an essential part of the production of socially necessary labour time for the society and the economy as a whole. There is a slogan that was an important part of the women's movement in the 2nd wave of feminism in the 1960s-70s which

was “the personal is political” – this slogan is not only about our personal relationships with our partners and people we know and interact with, it has as much to do with the nature of women’s oppression on a personal level in the home and its relation to societal roles that we live with on a daily level.

When women enter the capitalist labour market for the first time, they often enter it doing those tasks that are done at home and which are seen as women’s traditional labour; this, of course, is viewed as unskilled and hence earns low pay. Entering the labour market does not eliminate women’s primary responsibility for those tasks at home; what happens is that their exploitation in the labour market is then added to their oppression at home. In this sense, women’s dual oppression is clarified in that what is considered to be women’s work at home is often the same work that we do when we enter the labour market. In fact, what has happened is that irrespective of our level of education and training, women are still primarily doing traditional women’s labour after they enter the labour market. We are the nurses, the primary school teachers, the domestic workers, the cooks, the carers for children (in crèches), the elderly (nursing and care homes) and the sick and disabled.

Women, employment and the pandemic

The UN Women’s Group has put together some excellent recommendations for governments to address the impact of the coronavirus on women. The impact on women is significant for the following reasons:

“First, while the economic and social impacts on all are severe, they are more so for women. Many of the industries in the formal economy directly affected by quarantines and lockdowns—travel, tourism, restaurants, food production—have very high female labour force participation. Women also constitute a large percentage of the informal

economy in informal markets and agriculture around the world. In both developed and developing economies, many informal sector jobs—domestic workers, caregivers—are mostly done by women who typically lack health insurance and have no social safety net to fall back on.

At the same time, women typically shoulder a greater burden of care. On average women did three times as much unpaid care work as men at home even before COVID-19. Now, formal sector female employees with children are balancing one or more of the following: work (if they still have it), childcare, homeschooling, elder care, and housework. Female-headed households are particularly vulnerable.

Second, the crisis is having an impact on women’s health and safety. Apart from the direct impacts of the disease, women may find it hard to access much needed maternal health services given that all services are being directed to essential medical needs. Availability of contraception and services for other needs may become disrupted. Women’s personal safety is also at risk. The very conditions that are needed to battle the disease— isolation, social distancing, restrictions on freedom of movement—are, perversely, the very conditions that feed into the hands of abusers who now find state-sanctioned circumstances tailor-made for unleashing abuse.

Third, because the majority of frontline health workers—especially nurses—are women, their risk of infection is higher. (By some estimates 67 per cent global health force is women). So, while attention must be paid to ensuring safe conditions for ALL caregivers, special attention is needed for female nurses and carers—not only in access to personal protective equipment like masks but also for other needs such as menstrual hygiene products—that may be easily and inadvertently overlooked, but are essential to ensuring they are able to function well.

Finally, it is striking how many of the key decision-makers in the process of designing and executing the pandemic response are men. When any one of us

switches on the television anywhere in the world we see a sea of men. This is not surprising given that women still do not enjoy the same degree of participation in major decision-making bodies—governments, parliaments, cabinets or corporations—as men do. Only 25 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide are women, and less than 10 per cent of Heads of State or Government are women. While we have a few shining examples of women Heads of State or Government, women are conspicuous by their absence in decision-making fora in this pandemic. [33]

The Women’s Budget group in Britain has compiled information about women and the Coronavirus. It is rather dispiriting as it demonstrates women’s entrapment in traditional labour and also how this labour is perceived in the economy as a whole. [34]

Key facts: Women and Covid- 19

Women are the majority of health and care workers. 77% of healthcare workers are women, as are 83% of the social care workforce. [35]

Women are the majority of workers with highest exposure to Covid-19. Of the 3,200,000 workers in ‘high risk’ roles, 77% are women. Over a million of these workers are paid below 60% median wages. 98% are women. [36]

Young women are disproportionately likely to work in the sectors that have been hit hardest by the lock-down. 36% of young women and 25% of young men worked in sectors that have been closed down including restaurants, shops, leisure facilities and travel and tourism. [37]

Women are more likely to be low paid and in insecure employment. Women are the majority of low paid earners (69%) the majority of those in part-time employment (74%), involuntary part-time employment (57%), temporary employment (54 %), zero-hours contracts (54%) and part-time self-employment (59%). [38]

Women are the majority of people living in poverty and female-headed households are more likely to be poor. For example, 45% of lone parents (90% of whom are women) are living in poverty. [39]

Pre Covid-19, women were more likely to struggle with debt and bills. 39% of women and 34% of men reported it was a struggle to keep up with bills, some or most of the time, 26% of women and 23% of men said they ran out of money by the end of the month and 29% of women and 23% of men said they would not be able to make ends meet for a month or less if they lost their main source of income. [40]

On average, women carry out 60% more unpaid work than men. This means they earn less, own less and are more likely to be living in poverty. [41]

What has become very clear about the nature of women's employment and the impact of Covid-19 is that women's employment is still largely located in traditional women's labour and that the crisis has impacted women's lives and has left us very vulnerable to both economic crises as well as to the real shocks to the economy caused by the pandemic.

In the case of women that do domestic labour as paid employment in different homes (cleaning and cooking), many have lost work and wages as people have gone into lockdown. Often this work is done on a personal level rather than through an agency; there is no protection for these workers in this situation. An additional form of work where women predominate is in the sphere of exchange; we disproportionately work in retail. The lockdown of the economy has on the one hand meant that those working in retail were not working (either sacked or on furlough) or they were working (in supermarkets) under conditions which are dangerous due to insufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) available.

In Britain, healthcare professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses, those involved in various forms of medical testing and physiotherapists) and those that work in hospitals in non-medical

professions (e.g., porters, cleaners, cooks and security) have been facing a shortage of PPE. An important issue that has arisen and must be noted is that due to the larger numbers of black women working in key sectors (healthcare, care sector) the rates of infection and deaths due to covid-19 are disproportionately high; while this is not the only thing going on here, we cannot ignore the impact of low wages and poverty and underlying medical conditions that impact people's health thereby making them more vulnerable to stronger versions of this virus (poverty causes that co-morbidity that is so dangerous). The intersections of race, class and gender are extremely relevant and cannot be ignored.

Those that work in care and nursing homes, hospices, those carers that go from home to home to help the elderly and infirm have until recently not had access to coronavirus testing but also still do not have access to sufficient PPE to protect themselves and the people they are assisting. [42] For example, if you are going from one home to the next, you need PPE for each place you visit. This prevents you getting sick, the client getting sick and of course, your family getting sick. If it is not obvious, the dangers of high-risk employment arise due to close contact with potentially infected people and caring for those that are sick or infirm.

This vulnerability is both in terms of terms of the high-risk employments that women do in the context of a pandemic (e.g., caring and health care), our entrapment in part-time employment and that our lower incomes (i.e., wages and benefits) arising from:

- the types of employment that we do;
- the perception that it is unskilled labour; and
- the predominance of women in part-time jobs, (both voluntary - to leave time to take care of our families - and involuntarily (difficulty of finding full time work in the employments that we do).

In many senses, what has also become obvious is that this form of work rather than being of a low-skilled

nature, actually, require skills that are essential if this labour is to do the job that it is meant to be doing. However, the persistence of low pay is telling.

The terms "undervalued and underpaid" categorises the vast majority of women's traditional labour. Part of this arises from its nature itself due to what is prized under the capitalist economic system; that is, the creation of surplus value. Much of this labour is expended and consists only in the production of socially necessary labour; there is no surplus in terms of value created that is added by this labour when employed in education, crèches, nursing and care homes and domestic labour. ?

While this is the case for much of traditional women's labour; it is certainly not the case for all women's labour in the private sector; for example, women have always worked in clothing and textile production in various employments. However, we are often segregated as "unskilled women's labour" even when using the same kind (or type) of labour that men do. Women have been sweated labour since they have entered the textile factories back in the 19th century. That this segregation of women's labour has persisted and that women's labour is still viewed as unskilled is interesting. It is certainly not due to the lack of necessity of this labour privately at home in doing social reproduction or in the labour markets as women's paid labour. So how can those employing us get away with this?

In an economic system based upon the creation of profits, the accumulation of capital and its expansion, women's traditional labour often falls into the production of socially necessary goods but rarely the production of surplus value. That is why much of this labour is done in the public sector (e.g., education, health care in Britain) and treated as a public good; making a profit running this type of work requires that labour is squeezed both in terms of controlling quantity and quality of work and in terms of money earned.

If the amount that the employer earns providing these services is fixed (for

example by the state or local councils), the only way to make profits is to cut costs and that often falls on the worker in the form of low wages and bad working conditions. If they can demand more for provision of the service, they can increase the costs to the consumer (think of the costs of private nurseries and childcare) thereby putting the service out of reach for many people.

To make profits in the private care sector where the amount charged is fixed externally, the conditions of work for employees become very difficult. In Britain, the amount of time spent in each home, the work that you do is decided by your employers in agreements with local councils who pay your boss to employ you to fulfil their contracts. Moreover, if there is insufficient demand throughout the location you are working in or for the type of work you do, there is no reason to employ you. Additionally, and unsurprisingly, wages of care workers have remained very low. Privatisation of care work has not improved its provision to ensure that those that need support actually can get it, the conditions of work for those working in the sector are even worse due to the profit motive, and since most care workers in the private sector are often not unionised (as opposed to the situation when they were a public sector worker with a union to fight for better working conditions and pay), their ability to fight for better conditions and pay are extremely difficult as they are easily threatened with sacking and replacement by yet another person.

Current Political Struggles

There are a number of struggles going on in Britain at the moment. Years of government austerity have undermined the public sector which includes our NHS, undermined the provision of services by local councils and has destroyed the Care Sector through privatisation.

Austerity led to deliberate underfunding of the NHS, the privatisation of its more profitable

parts and reduction of the public sector workforce. Current struggles around the provision of PPE for those that work in hospitals and nursing and care homes often relate back to this underfunding as well as the government's late response to the coronavirus. In a pandemic situation where having PPE is essential, workers do not have sufficient access.

A second area of struggle arises around the protection of people living in nursing and care homes, mental health hospitals and those getting care support at home that are extremely vulnerable to the virus and they are the ones that are more vulnerable to the virus and as such are disproportionately dying. It is not only the workers that are endangered as the statistics of all countries affected by this virus demonstrates. Endangering both the workers and those they are assisting is impressive; it is as though neither of them is seen to be important enough by the government to warrant protection and support.

"Even as the government was promising to protect the elderly and vulnerable from the deadly virus, local councils say they didn't have the tools to carry out the plan, and were often given just hours to implement new government instructions."

Policies designed to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed pushed a greater burden onto care homes. With hospitals given priority by the government, care homes struggled to get access to tests and protective equipment. The elderly were also put at potentially greater risk by measures to admit only the sickest for hospital treatment and to clear out as many non-acute patients as possible from wards. These findings are based on documents from government agencies seen by Reuters, interviews with five leaders of local authorities and eight care home managers.

It is too early to reach final conclusions about the wisdom of these policies. Still, staff and managers of many care homes say they believe the British government made a crucial early mistake: It focused too much attention on protecting the country's

National Health Service at the expense of the most vulnerable in society, among them the estimated 400,000 mostly elderly or infirm people who live in care homes across Britain. [43]

The third arena of struggle is happening in the education sector. The vast majority of children have not physically been in school during this period; the exception is Special Needs education and children of key workers. Education has been occurring on line. The obvious problem is those children whose families do not have computers and access to the internet are missing out on this education; the disparities in income and wealth between classes has not ceased. Many of these children from low-income families received food at school; provision for those children has been organised by their teachers (with funding from the government). But the inevitable problem of covering these children's needs between school terms is arising and the government is, as usual, on the wrong side of this issue ending vouchers for school meals for children during half-term (the break between school terms). [44]

The British government has recently decided to reopen schools in June. Teachers' unions have opposed this reopening of schools due to safety issues caused by the pandemic. While children are less affected by the pandemic (yes, I am aware of this new offshoot of the coronavirus which is killing children), the same cannot be said for their teachers, teachers' aides, cleaners and cooks in schools. Endangering yourself and bringing the virus home to your family is the last thing any person wants to do. On Friday, the British Medical Association backed the teachers' unions opposed to reopening schools in England (the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland schools will not be reopening as the decision is a devolved one for each country). [45] In the city of Liverpool, it was decided not to reopen schools. This struggle is ongoing and how it will be resolved, if at all, is still under debate between the government, teachers' unions and parents.

Conclusion

Much has been made of the importance of key workers during the coronavirus pandemic; clapping on Thursday nights now includes care workers as well as healthcare workers. In many senses, the coronavirus has altered the perception of women's employment in the societies in which we live.

Not only is traditional women's labour (which the vast majority of us are still employed in) undervalued and underpaid; in the context of this pandemic we are highly vulnerable as we are a majority of key workers. While deemed "unskilled by" an economic system which relies on our work to keep the reproduction of the system ongoing, our work has been essential in the fight against the coronavirus. The importance of women's labour has always been essential, but throughout this crisis, it has been demonstrated to be skilled labour. At the moment, our work has been recognised; our roles heralded, we are argued to be "heroes" for doing our jobs.

The impact of the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic will only increase. Jobs that existed before the pandemic may not exist after it. Restarting the global economy is just not a situation of pressing a button;

the interrelationship between production, distribution and exchange (and that includes international trade) in the context of a global economic crisis are multifaceted. Add to that we need to take into account Brexit in Britain. A return to austerity will mean a longer and deeper crisis in a situation where workers' social subsistence wage level has been eroded for over a decade. Our public sector and services are already in crisis. Investment by the private sector only occurs if the perception that profitability can be recovered. A tremendous amount of direct and indirect government investment and autonomous spending will be required to simply get everything going again. Workers' demand will be essential for recovery (even if government domestic spending will not not reap the rewards due to globalisation) so cutting wages even further to pay for pandemic spending is beyond stupid. We also desperately need to address the environmental crisis and shift production to carbon neutral production, sustainable energy production, public transport and green housing for life. This will require a rebalancing between the public and private sectors and the rebuilding of the public sector and the economy in a different direction from the path set out by neoliberalism.

When this crisis is over, will everyone forget how essential women's

traditional labour is? One thing that we must be fighting for is not to go back to how things were before the crisis. Our pay and conditions of work must not be downgraded again. Our work is not for "pin money"; we are an essential component in the provision of goods and services and we are still responsible for the majority of unpaid labour at home. At work we need to be organised in trade unions and we must gain better conditions of work and pay; this means that we need allies and our contribution to society be recognised. At home, our oppression must be addressed. Ending and reversing privatising is a struggle that will not disappear. Returning care work to the public sector is essential as is listening to the demands of those that will be using that care (families, the elderly, disabled people, children). Is socialisation of women's work the way forward? How can we win a struggle along these lines and in which way? Can we develop community based and run social care, nurseries and crèches? How can we transform the perception of women's work? These questions may not have an immediate answer today, but they must be addressed if we are to move forward...?

18 May 2020

Source *Daily Kos Anticapitalist meetup*.

Unionism's silent shift on the pandemic: Not consensus - simple survival!

23 May 2020, by **Socialist Democracy**

In the general fog a significant but silent shift has taken place in Ulster Unionism. Arlene Foster, the Democratic Unionist Party's leader, alongside Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill, announced a five-point plan for a gradual emergence from the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Like many other plans it is very light on detail on the steps that will be taken

to protect workers who return to work and uniquely it has no time scale at all.

The reason for the lack of time scale is pretty evident. It is quite clear that the Northern plan, while not identical, runs parallel to the time frame produced by the Irish government. This convergence was made clear

when the Northern Executive took its first steps on the plan on the same day that the Dublin initiative was enforced.

For some time leading scientific figures have been calling for an All-Ireland response to the viral threat. The charge has been led by Professor Gabriel Scally, who constantly

denounces the idea that there can be two Covid 19 strategies on one island and who has become so repelled by British government complacency that he has set up an independent body to challenge the official, misnamed, SAGE committee. The Unionist response has been one of saluting the flag and following the British lead. They argue that they are 'following the science' but never explain why British science is different from WHO science. On its part Sinn Fein has concentrated on avoiding blame. Many people were left scratching their heads when Michelle O'Neill called for more testing in care homes, unable to understand why a member of the Stormont administration did not simply enforce the tests.

The new plan is a more rational approach in line with Dublin proposals. The DUP have accepted this as long as Sinn Fein agree never to notice the correlation between the two plans and to endorse the local plan, firmly labelled as Northern Irish.

Some commentators have seen this as evidence of the gradual evolution of the Good Friday institutions towards stability and cooperation, an argument given the semblance of credibility by complaints from DUP far right politician Sammy Wilson. In reality the Stormont Parties are struggling for survival. They all have histories of running down the Health Service and of cutting health workers pay. They have fiddled the figures to conceal the true level of infection and to cover up the decimation of the elderly population in private care homes. Recent press reports showing that 50% of all deaths have occurred in these homes has led to a muffled apology from the health minister and a promise to do better in the future, a promise readily accepted by the leadership of the local health unions. The hypocrisy of the apology can be seen by the failure to respond to Professor Scally and by the fact that legal action is now being taken by relatives of victims.

While the Stormont decision is a

welcome move towards rationality, that doesn't mean it's good news for workers. The ambiguity and vagueness is there to protect the political Parties rather than to advance the interests of the workers. The plan is not time based, but neither is it criteria based, so when workers are pushed back to work it depends on the whim of the government rather than concrete steps to protect them, something that is also a feature of the Dublin plan.

Dublin and Belfast, with the aid of the trade union leadership and the general anxiety produced by the pandemic, have managed to run with the old lie: We are all in this together. That myth will not survive attempts to return to the status quo, given the risks to the workforce and that demands that billions in debt repayment must come from the workers.

16 May 2020

Source [Socialist Democracy](#).

The “resumption” of all the dangers in National Education

23 May 2020, by **Marie-Hélène Duverger**

In schools located in lower-income neighbourhoods, the return has taken place with “classes” sometimes reduced to two or three students, in an atmosphere that oscillates between that of a hospital and that of a prison, despite the windows that must remain wide open at all times (even if it is cold or if there is noise outside).

What “health protocol”?

No or very little recreation, no possibility of physical contact, no touching of books or dictionaries, no use of pens or scissors, no school dinners, no collective sports, no

educational outings, but “traffic directions”, flagging tape everywhere, litres of hydroalcoholic gel behind every door, masked and distant teachers, who are themselves stressed and not very enthusiastic.

This “return” does not in any way allow the re-appropriation of a collective place of learning to students assigned to the same place for several hours, often made inaudible by wearing the compulsory mask and worried about not respecting “distancing procedures” and correct hand washing! The expression “health protocol” is no doubt envisaged by the Ministry of Education and its academic or departmental branches as something “reassuring” for staff,

students and their parents, but it is just the opposite.

This protocol is impossible to apply without transforming schools into barracks and conceals major flaws in relation to the spread of the virus. The masks provided to college staff and students are not personal protective masks (FFP2 for example), and they are not even surgical masks. They are so-called “general public” masks, whose instructions clearly state, “filtration efficiency greater than 90% for particles of 3 microns emitted by the person wearing the mask”. This is proof that wearers of the mask are not protected.

Take back whatever it costs?

The reason why is not difficult to understand as soon as you use one of these masks, which seem as fragile as education minister Blanquer's honesty. There is what is called a significant "leak rate": the masks are not airtight on the face, and while part of the air breathed in passes through the mask and is filtered, a possibly

significant part passes between the mask and the face. Not to mention the fact that large scale testing was not practiced before putting young people and adults back in contact in educational institutions.

On 18 May Blanquer was forced to admit that 70 schools or establishments reopened since 11 May have experienced cases of Covid, but he had the nerve to affirm that it was not at school that the sick people had caught the virus! [46] Move on (like

the virus), there is nothing to see here! The first collective mobilizations took place timidly on Monday: strikes in some nursery schools, where the application of distancing is even less possible than elsewhere, rallies outside academic inspectorates to denounce the unsatisfactory conditions of the "return" and so on. It's a line in the sand to be drawn quickly if we do not want schools to become barracks through which the second wave of the epidemic will sweep!

Johnson government forced to U turn on NHS and schools

22 May 2020, by **Dave Kellaway**

As Starmer said to Johnson, you clap enthusiastically on Thursday during the weekly celebration of the care workers then you send them a bill. For a family of four in a low paid health job this is several thousand pounds. The Prime Minister replied by repeating this key Brexit promise that the 'national' health service had to be paid for and if these people did not pay then it would cost the 'British taxpayer' £900 billion. Of course this was a complete exaggeration, experts have calculated from between £35 to £90 billion. Like Trump, lies fly from his mouth as he waffles.

One day later the money can be found elsewhere and the decision was reversed. Johnson sent out designated scapegoat, health minister, Matt Hancock to announce the volte-face. The change was nothing to do with Johnson 'reflecting' but all about a threatened revolt inside his own party with Tory MPs intimating that they would vote with Labour on this amendment. Online opinion did play a role with the story of the Syrian refugee who had gone to work as a cleaner in the front line. His appeal went viral, already forcing U turn on bereavement leave, granting indefinite leave to remain in Britain to relatives of migrant NHS workers who die in

the pandemic. [47]

So it is a victory but one that does not extend to all non-EU key workers who do not work in the NHS or social care but are cleaners, taxi drivers or other key workers keeping society together. The Labour leadership have not extended a call for the whole surcharge to be abolished for all non-EU migrants, who pay the same taxes as everybody else.

Just the day before we saw the first U turn when the 'definite' date of opening up primary schools to 4 and 5 and 10 year olds became a lot less definite and was open to further consultation.

The role of the teachers' trade unions, particularly the National Education Union (NEU) which includes some left leaders, was decisive. The NEU ran a model online campaign, reaching out to parents, local councils (which still have governance of most primary schools) and medical/scientific specialists. It regularly consulted its workplace representatives and entire membership. Last week it organised the first 20,000 strong online union mass meeting. Every day on the mass media it led the news agenda. Teachers dragged the Starmer

leadership into taking a firmer line although the latter continually couched its opposition in terms of achieving consensus and agreement.

Starmer was careful not to make any call that would clearly back the NEU and teachers taking action against the government, local education authorities or their headteachers on June 1st. In the end nearly 70 local education authorities indicated their reluctance to open schools up further on that date. Even a few local authorities led by the government political party joined in the scepticism. The battle is continuing as the government is releasing today some further 'scientific' evidence justifying the re-opening. It is hoping that it can start a drift back by some schools that could weaken the national opposition.

Both U turns show that the government, which won a strong 80 seat majority in the 'Get Brexit Done' election last December, is vulnerable to organised opposition. Although it is still well ahead of Labour in terms of electoral voting intentions the approval ratings for Boris Johnson have slumped and those for Keir Starmer have risen.

Nevertheless the Labour leader

persists in a very lawyerly way to itemise the 'mistakes' of the government over the Covid crisis but always in an almost well-intentioned way so they can come to a new national consensus. The climbdown over schools opening was not even taken up by Starmer in the PMQs. He never explains how all these mistakes are connected to an neo-liberal, anti-

state, anti-planning and British exceptionalist framework. A framework amounting to class war which of course as a good Fabian Starmer completely rejects. [48]

Developing active opposition that goes beyond Starmer's approach is not easy since everything has to be online, the Labour Party is shutdown as a

decision-making organ at local and regional level and now the September national conference has been cancelled. Normally the rank and file membership have a clear voice at that meeting. Nevertheless pushing Johnson back is a morale boost for the left and progressive opinion.

22 May 2020

Class Struggle and Social Protest in the Coronavirus Pandemic

22 May 2020, by **Dan La Botz**

Throughout the pandemic, federal and state governments and public and private employers failed to protect workers' health and their income. Essential workers who were forced to continue working without adequate safety and health protection either protested or walked off the job in hundred of mostly small, brief, and localized wildcat strikes. [49] Some of these, like a small walkout at Amazon warehouse in New York, garnered publicity but failed to find a mass following. Others had a bigger impact.

Nurses and other hospital workers organized demonstrations to demand masks, gowns, and ventilators. Many nurses protested at their hospitals, but some from the National Nurses United went to the White House to demand that Trump invoke the Defense Production Act (DPA) to order the production of masks, ventilators and coronavirus test kits. [50] While there, in a moving tribute, they read the names of their coworkers killed by the virus. [51] Federal and state governments and hospital managers responded by making greater efforts to provide supplies for workers.

Nurses were not alone. In mid March teachers threatened a sickout to force the closure of the New York Public Schools when Mayor de Blasio and

and their own union, the United Federation of Teachers failed to do so. [52] In late April about 50 workers walked off the job at the Smithfield meatpacking plant in Nebraska over health and safety issues. The governor promised to bring testing and contact tracing to the plant. In Washington where there is a long history of worker strikes, hundreds of fruit packers struck for safer working conditions and hazardous duty pay.

Some unions have provided leadership. The Amalgamated Transit Union has supported bus drivers who have struck over health in Detroit, Birmingham, Richmond, and Greensboro. [53] The Carpenters Union, which represents about 10,000 workers in Massachusetts, ordered its members to strike on April 5 over concerns about Covid-19 and did not end the strike until April 20. [54]

Many unions issued statements calling for employers and government to protect their members and provided helpful information. And unions have also lobbied Congress. But in general they have not attempted to raise the level of class struggle as might be possible.

Some unions capitulated to reopening factories and resuming production, even though it is clear that it may put

their members' health at risk. As early as May 5 the United Auto Workers conceded that the company had the contractual authority to resume production in May in the GM, Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler plants, without strong guarantees of health protections.

The largest left organization, the Democratic Socialist of America, already active among nurses and teachers unions, joined forces with the United Electrical Workers Union known as the UE, and together they have created the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee. [55] EWOC is training hundreds of volunteer organizers to help workplace activists organize. DSA has also begun to organize a network of restaurant workers in several cities.

The pandemic and the shutdown have taken a toll, but they now provide an opportunity to rebuild the American labor movement from the bottom up. While the challenges will be great, working class resistance is growing and socialists with a rank-and-file strategy and class struggle perspective are involved in the fight.

18 May 2020

Source [*New Politics*](#).

For the cancellation of debts and dropping of the “free trade” agreements

21 May 2020

The people of North Africa and the Middle East/The Arab region are facing a great ordeal in light of the global health crisis caused by the Corona virus pandemic. The latter revealed the depth of the destruction that capitalism has unleashed on mankind and nature. The dominant classes are trying to guarantee profits for the major companies and banks at the expense of the working classes (in its broad sense) as well as small-scale producers. These are found in the frontlines, moving the production wheel, risking their lives in the worst conditions of exploitation. The imperatives of quarantine increase their suffering with the absence of a decent public health sector hollowed by decades of neoliberal policies. In particular, women bear the brunt of this exceptional situation, whether in the workplace or at home.

There has been an accumulation of experiences of popular struggles for more than forty years against the policies of neo-colonialism, dependency, and the unequal exchange imposed on us by the imperial decision-centers, with the complicity of governments and existing political systems in our countries. It exploded in the form of a massive revolutionary process, the first of which began with the revolution in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria (end of 2010 – early 2011), and the second phase with the revolutions in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq (end of 2018 – beginning of 2019). The masses in the streets and squares expressed their will to be free from oppression and tyranny, and they demanded freedom and social justice.

We, as organizations, movements, and networks of resisting groups of workers, women, youth, oppressed nationalities and minorities, cling to the demands of this revolutionary

process and strive to achieve it. We will not allow the Corona pandemic to be used to consolidate the counter-revolution and eradicate our democratic aspirations, nor will we accept the continued neoliberal austerity measures that generalize poverty and unemployment and establish a general framework of social inequality. More than ever, and very urgently, the current context stresses the need to intensify cooperation and collective thinking to lay the foundations of a society of freedom, dignity and social justice, values that our peoples have demanded for long.

Let us mobilize in order to cancel the public debts

Public indebtedness constitutes a system of plundering our wealth and subjecting our peoples to the global imperialist system. Debt services absorb every year the social budgets of our countries. Public health spending is significantly less than the minimum levels set by the World Health Organization. It is necessary to stop repaying public debts to provide the necessary financial liquidity in order to face the Corona epidemic and to confront the deepening social and economic crisis. Likewise, all forms of privatization of public services must be halted. Priority should be given to developing a public health sector and developing free and good health and medical care systems.

The demand for cancellation of external debt has always been among the popular demands in our region since the debt crisis and the structural adjustment programmes that followed in the early eighties. Tunisia and

Egypt campaigned to cancel the odious debts contracted by the dictators who were ousted by the revolutions. Initiatives have emerged in the recent Lebanese popular movement calling for stopping the payment of debts and enacting a program of social, food and health protection reforms for the population. In the context of the Corona crisis at the global level, calls for stopping the payment of public debts of countries from the Global South increased. Therefore, we must continue to mobilize at the level of our region to impose a unilateral and sovereign moratorium on debt repayments in our countries that are threatened by a humanitarian catastrophe due to the absence of conditions to cope with the Corona outbreak. Popular control must also be established over the funds that will be freed by stopping the payments, which must be spent first on health needs and support for the groups mostly affected by the Corona crisis. The moratorium on repayments must be coupled with the establishment of mechanisms for auditing public debts that would enable the majority of citizens to be involved in identifying the illegitimate, odious and illegal sections of these debts, which must be cancelled and entirely revoked. The freed up resources will be allocated to implement economic, social and environmental measures that derive their foundations from the basic needs of the working classes, small-scale producers and marginalized groups in general.

The cancellation of public debt will inevitably entail the need to break with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These two institutions have supported the dictatorial regimes in our region, aligned themselves with the major imperialist powers and the Zionist

state in Israel in order to curb the revolutionary process, and have continued to deepen indebtedness and adapt our economies to serve multinational companies and major financial speculators globally. The emancipation of our peoples from the yoke of tyranny will not be complete without creating this rupture from the centres of imperialist decision-making.

Illegal private debts

Public debts are paid at the expense of the deteriorating social conditions of the majority of the working and popular classes and their low annual income. This situation forces them, in turn, to borrow from banks, housing, consumption and micro-credit institutions at high interest rates. In the context of the economic crisis exacerbated by the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, unemployment will rise and the difficulties of these groups in covering living, health and education expenses will increase. The indebtedness of small-scale producers, such as the toiling peasants, who live through a severe process of impoverishment that threatening their own existence, will be exacerbated. Hence the necessity of calling for stopping the payment of various debts, organizing a popular campaign to investigate all forms of plunder and unfair conditions imposed by financial sector institutions, and scrutinizing the illegitimate and illegal foundations to cancel repaying these loans.

Nationalization / socialisation of the banking sector

To emphasise social and environmental priorities, it is crucial to establish an interest-free public borrowing system rather than promoting loans with interests that develop profits for financial capital. This, in turn, assumes the socialisation of the banking sector, that is, confiscation without any compensation for the major shareholders in banks, and linking it to the public sector under popular control. Socialisation

has a much more radical content than nationalisation, which may be limited to the state buying the shares of the big capitalists at high prices. It is this radical content that was strongly proposed in the recent Lebanese popular movement when active groups demanded the fall of the rule of banks, the fall of the ruling oligarchy, the condemnation of corrupt officials, and the building of an economy based on social justice.

Cancelling the “free trade” agreements, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA)

The “free trade” agreements are neo-colonial agreements that have been imposed on our peoples. They deepen dependency and trade deficits, increased our reliance on food imports from the global speculative markets, and destroy productive activities, livelihoods, and permanent employment opportunities. These agreements generalised the dominance of multinationals and part of the big local capital over lucrative economic sectors, over public services, including health and medicines, and insured the protection of their “rights” through intellectual property and patent laws. The so-called new generation of free trade agreements includes all areas of economic, social, cultural, environmental areas, as is the case with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA and ALECA in French) for Morocco and Tunisia, countries that are still witnessing some mobilisations to prevent the imminent signing. Thus, “free trade” agreements, along with public debts, constitute the tools of imperialist domination over our countries. They must be abolished and we must put forward alternatives

around trade cooperation that respond to the needs of peoples and are based on equality, justice and complementarity. These alternatives shall give priority to small-scale and localised channels of exchange in the North and the South, and strengthen direct relations between producers and consumers. Achieving this requires building an independent local industrial economy centred on food sovereignty and based on democracy and solidarity. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the rupture with the institutions of world capital, including the World Trade Organization.

Summary

We, the signatories of this call, and in support of the gains of the popular uprisings for democracy, freedom and social justice in our region, we demand:

- A unilateral and sovereign halt of public debts payments, and the allocation of funds to public health, and in support of vulnerable groups affected by the Corona crisis,
- A citizen audit of public debts to determine their illegitimate, odious and illegal components and imposing their cancellation,
- Stopping the payment of private debts by needy families, small-scale producers, small peasants and daily workers, and organising actions against banks, housing, consumption and micro-credit institutions,
- Examining all forms of plunder and unfair conditions imposed by financial sector institutions in private loan contracts, and highlighting the illegal and unlawful grounds for their cancellation,
- Cancelling the “free trade” agreements and the DCFTAs for Tunisia and Morocco,
- Making a break with the trinity of global capital: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.

We also call for:

- Setting up a large popular committee to audit the debts of our countries at the regional level that includes all segments of society, including associations, unions, networks, progressive parties, youth, women, and the unemployed, etc.

- Supporting the campaign to reject the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs, ALECA in French) in Tunisia, and give it a regional dimension.
- Organizing a strong regional campaign, united in its goals and timeline, to denounce the colonial content of the free trade agreements as well as the plunder of the wealth of our peoples through debt mechanisms.
- Organising a popular forum, to be held after the end of the Corona virus crisis in North Africa and the Middle East to deepen the debate and exchange experiences in order to expand the struggle against debts and "free trade" agreements.

Click [here](#) to sign the petition.

List of preliminary signatories

- Al Warcha media collective for socio-economic rights - Tunisia
- Tunisian Observatory of Economy - Tunisia
- ATTAC-CADTM - Morocco
- Working Group of Food Sovereignty - Tunisia
- The Initiative of Support for Cooperatives - Egypt
- North African Food Sovereignty Network
- Women and Youth Union Forum - Iraq
- Socialist Workers' Party - Algeria
- Nomad 08 Association - Tunisia
- Tunisian Platform of Alternatives - Tunisia
- Mauritanian Network for Social Work - Mauritania
- Association "Intervention for Sustainable Fishing" - Mauritania
- Awareness Association - Sudan
- Million Rural Women - Tunisia
- Association "Social and Economic Research - Mohamed Ali El Hammi - Tunisia
- The Socialist National Democratic Party - Tunisia
- Bread and Freedom Party (in the process of constitution) - Egypt
- The Pole Party (Al Qotb) - Tunisia
- The Revolutionary Democratic National Youth Organisation "Kifah" - Tunisia
- The Right to Water Forum in the Arabic Region
- Mada Youth Network - Lebanon
- Al-Mounadila Current - Morocco
- Arab Forum of Alternatives - Lebanon
- National Union of Fishers - Coastal and Offshore fishing - Morocco
- Moroccan Commission for Human Rights - Morocco
- National Coordination of North African Food Sovereignty Network (represents 25 organisations) - Morocco
- "Matssalounach" Campaign - Tunisia
- Workers' Club for Awareness and Solidarity - Morocco
- Iraqi Social Forum - Iraq
- Information Centre for Research and Development - Iraq
- Network of Solidarity and the Protection of Environment - Mauritania
- Moroccan Association of Human Rights - Morocco
- Sport Against Violence - Iraq
- Association "Work for the Treatment of Heart Disease Sufferers" - Mauritania
- "Shakoufian" Organisation - Iraq
- Tadhamun (Solidarity) - Iraq
- Candles for Equality Association - Morocco
- Association "Green Tunisia" - Tunisia
- Association "Health for the People" - Tunisia
- Modernity and Democracy Forum - Morocco
- National Federation of Education/UMT, democratic current - Morocco
- Workers' Services Association - Morocco

A report on a social climate change action in West Africa

21 May 2020, by **Patrice Assiongbon Sowanou**

Being in Africa, on the other side of the world, it is very difficult to say if any serious action has been taken against climate change. The fact is, from the top leaders on down, people seem ignorant of the scourge.

In Benin, my country, we should ask ourselves if we really have knowledge about climate before thinking of any possible action. In 2014 AVAAZ, a humanitarian organization, mobilized many people in Cotonou, especially the youth, for a climate change campaign.

Three weeks earlier before this campaign, a series of trainings were undertaken. The youth were well informed about the emergency related to climate change. All in attendance came to realize how careless environmental practices in daily life and the excessive use of plastic causes serious damage to our planet.

The objectives of the campaign are to call the attention of everybody on the imminent dangers. Television, radio stations and newspapers relayed the tremendous work AVAAZ was doing. The campaign took place on the main street and ended up on the widest beach of Cotonou. Men and women were dressed in white and green T-Shirts with a sole call: SAVE OUR PLANET.

For more than four hours of walking the number of walkers increased. Many people joined the queue. It was the biggest campaign of information about climate change in Benin. Under a hot sun, the marchers kept walking, and passing out flyers. Groups of the Red Cross were in charge of bottled water distribution. Not a single bottle or flyer was wasted or thrown on the street. All possible trash was carefully disposed of.

Fidjrosse beach was the last stage of the campaign. Many groups were at the beach to remove any kind of trash, plastics, papers, bottles. In the space of an hour, the beach was completely cleaned up in a way it had never been before.

To the great surprise of everybody, the Minister of Environment made his way with his people to the center of the gathering. In a shaking voice, he managed to deliver a message of gratitude to the planners of this campaign. He saluted the initiative of AVAAZ and promised to do his best to effectively insert the climate topic in the government.

At the end of his speech, the founder of AVAAZ folded the message, put it into a calabash and threw it into the sea as a symbolic imminent call to humanity for action.

Source [Solidarity](#).

We are not all in the same boat

20 May 2020, by **Dave Kellaway**

But just the other week at the daily government press conference the graph with the comparable number of deaths in Europe suddenly was no longer on show. Why? Last week Britain had already suffered more deaths than anywhere else except the USA and is on course to having the highest rate per 100,000 people. Previously the government was happy to compare our great British exceptionalism with those poor forsaken Italians, today apparently it is far too complicated to make such comparisons. Tory ministers are instructed not to mention the Germans.

Right at the beginning one of the main scientific advisors had suggested that a death toll of 20,000 would be a

'success'. Today we are at over 34,000 according to the narrowly defined government figures. The National Office of Statistics puts it at over 40 thousand and serious research bodies like the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine speak of 60,000. As the Financial Times, the paper of the 'intelligent' wing of the bourgeoisie had discovered, the only correct way to work out the death toll is to take the difference between the 5 year average death rate and the rate this year, thus giving you the excess deaths. It is difficult for a government to dispute the actual number of registered deaths.

Why has there been such a slaughter?

1. Clearly a major error was to adopt the theory of herd immunity. This idea was that once a certain percentage of the populations was infected, say 60%, there would be immunity for all and the more vulnerable could meanwhile be protected. Of course this is a convenient theory for all those who own and control the economy who wanted to minimise the loss of production. So the lockdown came at least three weeks too late. Italian friends of ours were scrambling to get their loved ones out of London as soon as they saw what was happening. They

were seeing the massacre in Lombardy.

2. It followed logically that a massive system of testing with contact tracing was not a priority. The efforts already underway were officially abandoned in March and Britain even today is still playing catch up with its testing capacity.

3. Such decisions were bad enough but they have to be understood within a historical framework of a ten year long programme of austerity. Cuts in public spending and working people's wages were made to pay for the government money used to bail out the banks following the 2008 financial crash. This meant Britain had thousands less intensive beds available than Germany as well as less trained health personnel. Putting money into adequate stockpiles of personal protection equipment (PPE) or spare ventilators was seen as extravagance. We know many key workers have died through lack of PPE.

4. It is not just a question of accounting. Conservative policy (similar to Blair's too in many respects) was all about the market and private being good and planning and public being bad. Key functions of the National Health Service (NHS) and the social care system were privatised and fat contracts given to big or small outsourcing private for profit companies. The local state's public health structures were also seen as a luxury. These are the very specialists who today would be vital in running a locally based test, track and contact operation.

5. Today the scandal of the dire state of the residential care system for older people or others with difficulties is being exposed. Up to 40% of deaths are probably taking place not in hospitals but in care homes. The residential care system which at one time was largely run by local authorities is now almost completely privatised or run by a multitude of charities. Central funding for paying the costs of a large minority of old people who cannot pay for their own care has been cut. The residential sector, despite being squeezed still makes good profits from the high fees

it earns from the majority who usually have sold their homes to pay for care. No wonder there are quite large financial companies, even hedge funds, who invest in this sector.

6. A fatal error that has now emerged in the open was the official policy of releasing older patients with the disease from hospitals back into care homes thus sparking hundreds of hot spots of the virus. There is even an official statement made early on that there was 'no risk of an epidemic breaking out in the care homes'. The drive for maximum profit explains the zero hours contracts and minimum wage (£8.20 an hour) for staff working in these homes. It is policy for many of these homes to have floating agency workers who move in and out of homes as the need arises. This working practice resulted in multiple cross contaminations. The care home system is fragmented between thousands of owners and entities and is not articulated efficiently with either the local state or the NHS.

7. Planning for pandemics and maintaining structures for this was a low priority and clear evidence has emerged of various official bodies predicting problems if there were a virus outbreak. A committee called Cygnus wrote reports along those lines two years ago. It is almost as if the older conservative party ideology of a certain patrician public service ethos has been shattered as the party had adopted tough, neoliberal Brexit policy.

8. Today in the middle of this terrible crisis the government still prefers to hand out key operations to its friends in the big outsourcing and accounting companies like Deloitte, Capita or Serco. So they get the contract for the testing or digital applications. The Guardian (15.5.20) exposed how an American company responsible for stockpiling PPE material had performed so badly that the British Army had to step into rescue it.

Class, Race and Gender inequality

in the Covid crisis.

The death notices are revealing the truth, we are not all in the same boat. If you are Black, Asian, disabled or a low paid worker you are four or five times more like to die than the rest of the population. The British press had done a reasonable job in telling the stories of those who have died. All the photos of the health workers quickly show that around a half are not white British but are either from a different heritage or are migrants from places like the Philippines. The latter, believe it or not, have to pay £600 a head for their families to use the very health services that they are keeping afloat. The migrants who the Brexit campaign specifically targeted to win the vote are precisely the key workers who are dying, caring and keeping services going. Yesterday in parliament the home secretary refused to change the rules in her new points-based visa system which means anyone earning less than £21,500 will not be let in - excluding many of the people these ministers are hypocritically clapping every Thursday at 8pm.

We are not all equal in the lockdown:

- • working on the computer at home with some flexibility is less onerous than risking contagion on public transport and at work;
- • if you have a big house and garden it is less stressful than if you are a family in a small apartment;
- • for women it is often a double or triple workload - working for a company on the PC, teaching the kids and cleaning the house and preparing meals;
- • during lockdown domestic violence against women has doubled;
- • not everybody is receiving 80% of their

wages, you may be able to get your rent and £94 a week on the 'safety net' of universal credit but if you were working in the informal economy as a migrant it can be difficult to claim.

Some effects of the lockdown have been positive:

- • We have seen an enormous network of mutual aid organised, sometimes down to street level, this is organised on social media and there is often an overlap with Labour or radical activists
- • Everybody is talking about how the air is cleaner and nature is coming back and they are rediscovering quieter neighbourhoods by walking and cycling, people are growing flower and vegetables for the first time
- • A recent survey showed that post-pandemic 60% wish that health and wellbeing take priority over economic growth, more and more pundits compare the period that is coming something like what happened post-45 with the need for big changes.
- • It is much more difficult for the government to say there is no 'magic money tree' in the future. The conservative government is paying £14 billion a week to pay 80% of the salaries of 7.5 million workers. Money is being distributed quickly to the

health sectors after years of cuts.

Whether such sentiments are translated in a general political shift to more progressive political attitudes is another matter.

It is all very contradictory

A peculiarly British phenomenon is the number of people involved in crazy activities to raise money, mainly for the NHS. For instance an army veteran who was 99 years old did a sponsored walk up and down his garden and ended up raising £35 million. Captain Tom became a national icon and promoted to Colonel on his 100th birthday. Such actions just as easily reinforce a general political narrative that the Johnson government is keen to embed – that of a plucky, post-Brexit Britain resolutely 'beating' the virus through its wonderful NHS and heroic sacrifice and grit. The spirit of Britain standing alone in 1940 against the Nazis is explicitly exalted. Until the arrival of Phase 2 last week such sentiments of rallying around a national effort, led by a Prime minister, who crossed the front line into hospital himself and survived, meant that the Conservatives were over fifteen percentage points ahead of Labour and Johnson had high personal ratings.

Political difficulties for this government and the bosses

The so-called Phase 2 or the beginning of the exit strategy started last Monday has highlighted the differences existing among ruling class sectors about the road to follow. A minority in government is pushing for a more vigorous return to full production. They are ideologically uneasy about such massive government spending going to working people directly. There is a business lobby that is very vocal in the

sectors which are most at risk in a post Pandemic world such as aviation, cars, hospitality and tourism. It is pressurising the government to give it a lot of money with no strings attached. They want all restrictions to be over as quickly as possible. At the same time there is a debate on how to pay back the huge government debt that is accumulating. A document revealed by the Treasury (ministry of the budget), which is traditionally more conservative, projects salary freezes and spending cuts in pensions and elsewhere. Obviously they want the rich and business to pay the absolute minimum and are wary of too much Keynesian government intervention in their economy.

Another massive problem for the British ruling class is the centrifugal forces of Scottish and Welsh national devolved governments. These governments which control their own health services and education have not aligned with Johnson on the measures adopted for Phase 2 – the shift from Stay at Home to Stay Alert or the plan to send some classes back to school. Brexit has already stimulated Scottish nationalism, the pandemic risks making it stronger.

However Johnson for the moment understands, perhaps his personal illness has meant he is less gung-ho, that a too rapid exit strategy risks a second spike and even more economic disruption. He is also conscious of polls that show people are wary of leaving lockdown. It is unlikely that Johnson will attack health spending. There has been too much applause and almost religious veneration for the NHS which would make such a line politically impossible. Interestingly whereas the NHS has always been Labour's strongest electoral advantage today the conservatives under Johnson have managed to neutralise it not just during the crisis but with its use in the Brexit campaign and the first measures the government took. At the same time Johnson has the advantage that at the moment the cost of issuing government bonds to cover the debt is remarkably low. There is also quantitative easing which essentially allows the Bank of England to print money. Leading economists are saying this is all quite possible. A whole series of right wing

think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Centre for Policy Studies, have advised against a renewal of austerity. Johnson is said to have banned his ministers from using the term.

So it is probable that he will pursue a more complex strategy that suddenly launching a massive neo-liberal attack on the working class. Of course we are talking in this immediate period - further down the road all bets are off. Where it is possible to get away with some cuts - possible loosening the special protection for Pensions (the triple lock) or new taxes on the self-employed - he will do so. But the idea of a new Brexit period of increased state investment in the economy and a national recovery programme, a type of rightist, nationalist populism is possible. A no-deal Brexit is another difficulty he has. In any case the scope Johnson has for success rests on three factors:

a) How the government is seen to have managed Phase 2 and how far it is blamed for the scale of the crisis is still an open question. Opinion has become more negative with the way a shift to Phase 2 has been handled. The scandals of the care homes and the controversy over further opening of schools have not played well. Media coverage has been more critical. If the decline in deaths reverses Johnson could be in big trouble;

b) The capacity of the Labour Party under the new, more moderate leader, Kier Starmer, to mobilise opinion around a clear political alternative;

c) The response of the trade union movement and other active campaigns to the crisis.

Is Labour doing its job as official opposition?

Starmer is an elite lawyer and is praised for his forensic ability in debate. Certainly in a recent Prime Minister's questions session (every Wednesday in parliament) he demonstrated clinically how the

government had officially declared on the 28th February that the epidemic would not affect the retirement homes. Johnson just waffled and flat out denied it despite documentary evidence. Even the right wing dominated media accepted that he had been skewered.

However at the same time Starmer accepts the overall narrative set up by the Conservatives - 'it is an unprecedented crisis and as an opposition we will be constructive and loyal in the middle of a national crisis, we will praise the good things and criticise constructively the bad'. The tone of his interventions is that of the courtroom, there is no anger or political rhetoric that denounces the clear responsibilities of the government in one of the worst crises Britain has faced. Just after Johnson's big declaration on Phase 2 the 17 Labour MPs in the Corbynist Socialist Campaign group released a statement that defined the policy of Johnson as a declaration of class war against working people. Another example is illustrative. On a TV programme Anneliese Dodds, the shadow minister of the economy, explained correctly how the ten years of austerity had meant the crisis has been worse but she said she would not point the finger at George Osborne, the main architect of that austerity....who was sitting a couple of metres away.

It is very difficult for the 500,000 members of the Labour Party to put any pressure on the leadership or to put forward motions to the congress or higher structures of the party since everything has been shut down because of the epidemic. This is despite the fact that Parliament is operating using Zoom. There is a petition for online meetings to be official. The current leadership may prefer this situation. A recent survey said 61% Labour members thought Starmer was not critical enough of the government. On the left we have been holding online informal meetings.

In the last week with the government problems over Phase 2 and following that survey, Starmer and his team has become more critical but the tone is still the same. They do not even raise clearly the need for an official public enquiry when the crisis has eased.

Trade union responses

In the workplaces there have been few actions to defend health and safety. However given the partial return to work signalled by Phase 2 the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has been more active and has even obliged the government to consult it. Some concessions were won from the government about agreed guidelines for safe working. National consultations between Conservative governments and trade unions have been extremely rare for many years. The problem with the guidelines is that everything depends on the trade union organisation in each workplace. In the private sector the trades unions are very weak and the bosses in small workplaces can put a lot of pressure on working people to cut corners. More generally a big problem is for workers getting to work on transport where it is difficult to maintain social distancing. The railworkers union have threatened to take action to stop trains that they consider unsafe.

The other union that has been more organised is the teachers. Johnson wants 4 and 5 and 10 year old students to return to school on June 1st. The teachers unions united have laid down 5 tests for this to be possible. The government and their captive press have been putting a lot of pressure on teachers to cave in. Accusations of leftism and militancy have been levelled against the biggest union. Despite these attacks 7000 teachers have joined the union over the last week, a sign that many teachers will take action. A number of Labour led councils which have some control over education have said they will not open schools up further on June 1st. This has become one of the hottest political issues. The other night the National Education Union (NEU) organised a Zoom trade union meeting with 20,000 attending, which must be some sort of world record.

Starmer and his team have supported the tests set by the teachers but are careful not to be seen to defend any possible action of defiance come June 1st. They keep talking about finding a national consensus. Some Labour

party grandees on the right of the party like Blair and ex-ministers Blunkett or Johnson have called for the teachers to go in. One newspaper has called on Starmer to sort out the militant teachers and get them to concede.

What is to be done, what action programme for the crisis?

The crisis is so vast and deep that it is difficult both to develop a programme of demands that meets the needs of working people and to work out which particular issues will energise and mobilise people most. To some degree for a radical left that is a minority current we cannot on our own decide where the movement will go.

We need immediate demands around the exit strategy – health and safety at work, test, track and contact, campaign for international cooperation for a vaccine available without profit for everyone and job or salary guarantees with the winding down of the furloughing programme. At the same time we need a more ambitious programme of demands which has two legs:

a) defending our jobs, wages, the health service, social care and public spending including the elimination of the profit making from the NHS and the residential care system;

b) an ambitious green new deal which requires massive state investment that starts a shift in our whole model of production, consumption and energy use, all state money going to sectors in crisis such as the aviation industry to be conditional on this shift so no money without control.

International initiatives can also play a role since the pandemic does not recognise human frontiers. Some on the left have underestimated the ecological causes of the pandemic and instead focused on the economic dimensions or suggest no real

ecological progress can be made without a socialist revolution. The pandemic will come again if there is not a fundamental change in the relationship between humanity and nature. A totally new way of producing and consuming food is vital if we are to prevent pathogens passing into the millions of chickens, pigs or cattle kept in the mega farms. A no growth strategy with new patterns of consumption and transport is now on the table. European wide campaigning for taxes on wealth or big corporations to pay for the green new deal as suggested by the comrades in Anticapitalistas in the Spanish state might be a good project. Similarly people here have already identified the likelihood of millions of young people being unemployed, including graduates.

There is an opening for the left because Labour has already got policy on the Green New Deal with its quite radical line of zero carbon emissions by 2030. The ex-leader Ed Miliband had kicked off the debate on how the Green New Deal needs to be related to the post Pandemic world. He has talked about an army of zero carbon workers made up of young people but also people in transition from other ecologically destructive sectors.

For us the idea of a much greater commons – free, public services that can regain the spaces taken over by capitalist commodity – is a key idea. We should eliminate all private profit companies from the NHS and the care home system and then work out ways to coordinate their services on a local level. This would also involve a revaluation of what we dub purple jobs, often carried about by women. Decent training and careers will make the care homes much more stimulating and dignified places for older people. There is also the debate about a universal basic income. Some people on the left see it as a trap because it could individualise the problem of access to basic services and make it more difficult to demand proper funding for them. Some disabled people have found that having their own budget does not give them more autonomy or resources if

there is a negative effect on the provision of services, if they are privatised for example. Other people on the left think you could argue for such an income as well as defend the provision of more and better services. They would argue that a guaranteed income would mean workers could take action at work and have a back-up income to sustain a strike.

Another aspect of struggle that may come up more and more is that raised by Naomi Klein (see Long Read in Guardian, 19th May 20). She argues that there is a big threat from Big Tech – Google, Apple, Facebook, Twitter etc. – to take over government services on the basis of saving costs. For instance they start from the necessary increased screen time during the pandemic to argue this is the future. We can provide a huge chunk of education tailored to the individual using Artificial Intelligence. Governments might see a way of saving the cost of paying teachers. It could be extended to other sectors too – even into care homes with robots (already happening in Japan). Another great advantage for governments is that such an intervention comes with readymade monitoring and surveillance. China is already using such technology. We have already seen in Britain how the government has preferred to give big contracts to the corporations rather than to the NHS or the local authorities. It is a way of further privatisation. Instead we should argue for better, useful human jobs within the context of a four day week which would both be ecologically positive and assist people's capacity to get involved in political activity.

Finally there is another trap for the workers movement. It is possible that Johnson will play the card of the need for a great national recovery at the end of the pandemic. Already Frances O'Grady, leader of the TUC has floated the idea of some sort of national structure to accommodate this. While negotiations are one thing getting the movement tied in with some false national interest would be a mistake.

19 May 2020

Choosing between life or Capital in Latin America:

19 May 2020, by Jeffery R Webber

RN: Let's start at an epidemiological level. How has the virus impacted the region so far?

JW: In terms of the sheer number of cases and fatalities, all existing official numbers provided by states in the region are highly dubious. But you still have some discernible trends. In the future, the most reliable data - as elsewhere - will be the distinction between average death rates over the last several years and death rates during the pandemic period. Such death-rate analysis is particularly revealing both because these figures are more difficult for states to conceal or fudge, and because it captures deaths both from COVID-19 and those excess indirect deaths caused by people with other ailments who were not able to access necessary medical attention due to saturated capacity in the health system.

The full extent of this information will only be known some distance into the future, and perhaps never fully in the most under-resourced states. Nonetheless, there are already some initial studies focused on this kind of death rate comparison of select cities in the region, and the results are alarming; the high numbers also stand in stark contrast to the lack of attention paid to the Latin America scenario by the dominant international media compared to the coverage of Europe and North America.

As of May 11, according to data provided by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), there were 1.74 million reported cases of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in excess of 104,000 reported deaths from the virus. The rate of spread is also increasing decisively. Whereas it took three months for Latin America and the Caribbean to reach one million cases, it took fewer than three

weeks to roughly double that number. Last week alone there were some 20,000 additional reported deaths in the region, which represented a 23 percent spike over the previous week's numbers.

As of today (May 15), we know that the incidence of the virus in Brazil is escalating the most rapidly of any country in Latin America and the Caribbean, alongside severe scenarios in Peru, Ecuador and Mexico. Brazil has the highest level of COVID-19 cases and deaths across all indicators in the region. There were 203,165 confirmed cases and the official tally of deaths by the virus in the country was 13,999, but this is surely a dramatic underestimate. The healthcare system in Rio de Janeiro, for example, is completely overrun, as it is in a number of major cities elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. Big cities throughout the Amazon have been hit punishingly, and the Brazilian Amazon is no exception. A mortality study carried out by the New York Times, for example, showed that the Amazonian city of Manaus, which has a population of 2 million, recorded 2,800 deaths in April alone, which is about three times its historical average of deaths for that month.

Peru has the second highest number of confirmed cases in the region after Brazil at 80,604, with 2,267 deaths, followed by Mexico with 42,595 and 4,477 confirmed cases and deaths, respectively. Chile's official number of reported cases is also high, in excess of 37,000, with almost two-thirds in the capital, Santiago. Reported deaths are still below 400, but these are the official counts of the state - not comparative mortality rates based on the historical average, as in the Manaus example - and as we know from earlier official reporting in

Europe and the United States, the real mortality figures lag well behind the day-to-day death notifications in the media, which are invariably revised substantially upwards at a later date. In terms of health infrastructure and the wider socio-economic backdrop of society, of course, it is of significance that Chile is one of the richer countries in the region, even though access to that infrastructure is intensely uneven. So even with high numbers, the death rate as a proportion of cases is likely to be lower.

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Ecuador, by contrast, has been severely hit in terms of mortality rate (2,338 confirmed dead), even though the absolute number of reported cases is relatively lower than in Chile, at 30,500. A Financial Times investigation revealed that in the province of Guayas alone (the province contains the major coastal city and coronavirus hotspot of Guayaquil), there were 11,500 excess deaths, or 459 percent higher than historically average mortality rates in the province, between the outset of the pandemic in Ecuador at the close of February and April 28, the last day of data analysed. This is instantaneously revealing of a feature of the present conjuncture that we'll get into more - that is, this is not merely a natural crisis; rather, the uneven scale and depth of the impact has everything to do with the social conditions operative in specific locations. Thus, Ecuador is in no position relative to Chile to deal with what's happening at the infrastructural level of its health system.

Patterns elsewhere are indicative of exceptionality. For example, Argentina, which neighbours both Brazil and Chile, has a distinctively

lower rate of transmission (7,134 confirmed cases), death rate (353), and so on. It also has witnessed a notably more extensive response from the state that helps to explain this discrepancy – early, state-enforced social isolation even when there were few cases. Already there is pressure from capital to open up the country's economy at whatever cost to lives. President Alberto Fernández – a figure who emerged from the more conservative wing of Peronism, but who was drawn somewhat to the centre-left given the fact that he owed his presidential candidacy entirely to his vice-presidential co-runner, former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner – is taking a stance quite distinct from the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and, in other ways, from the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera in Chile and the centre-right administration of Martín Vizcarra in Peru. This could have important political repercussions coming out of the first phase of this crisis.

At a first bird's eye glance, those are some of the places that are intensifying – Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile – with Argentina as a contrast study. If, and more likely when, the virus hits Central America and the Caribbean in a more concerted way the results are likely to be devastating. Countries such as Honduras, Haiti, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are very poorly positioned in terms of infrastructure to cope with a wide-scale unleashing of the virus, and this is even before we consider the interacting premise of an unsurpassed global depression. If it takes hold in these areas in a significant way the disaster could be monumental.

In Venezuela, where the official indications are that the case (455) and death-rates of COVID-19 are remarkably low (10), we don't yet have an accurate picture of how severe the problem is, but as in the Central American and Caribbean cases just mentioned, the health system is monumentally ill-equipped to handle any significant outbreak – problems of a dearth of basic medical supplies, ventilators, personal protective equipment, reliable electricity, and so on are self-evident,

exacerbated by prolonged economic depression and US sanctions.

There is also the issue of the vulnerability of the over 5 million Venezuelan migrants who have left the country since 2015 – Venezuela is now in the highest position in the world in terms of outward migration, overtaking Syria recently. More than 1.8 million of the total number of Venezuelan migrants are presently in Colombia. They are now in desperate straits because they are not eligible for emergency resources from the Colombian state, and the viability of the sort of petty informal labour and commerce many of them were engaged in until recently has been all but eliminated.

So there's a real trauma there, and some are attempting to return home by foot, although whether what awaits them there is actually superior to their present circumstances is questionable. Even if it's true that the rate of infection is low so far in Venezuela, the infrastructural degradation of the social functions of the Venezuelan state after successive years of extremely intense socio-economic crisis, combined with the morally destitute sanctions imposed by United States, means that Venezuela could easily become one of the worst affected countries in the region if conditions change. In host countries further south, due to border closures and lack of transport, Venezuelan migrants facing similar straits as those in Colombia – in Peru, Chile, and elsewhere – are more or less stuck where they are for the time being.

I think we are in very early days, but that's part of the basic regional pattern visible so far.

RN: So the pattern so far is uneven. Could you elaborate on the underlying dynamics that explain that unevenness? For example, the health of the public infrastructure across states, the condition of the working classes and oppressed, and so on?

JW: It is very clear that even prior to the onset of COVID-19 the social situation in much of Latin America and the Caribbean had deteriorated gravely since at least 2013, and many

of the modest but important improvements in poverty rates and income inequality achieved during the era of progressive governments and capitalist dynamism driven by a global commodity boom (2003-2012) had already been significantly reversed.

The pandemic will exacerbate these conditions sharply. This week, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) published a projection of expected poverty increases in 2020, based on their conservative calculation of what constitutes poverty. The report suggests that there will be 28.7 million more poor people, and 15.9 million additional extremely poor people in the region by the end of this year. Added to the existing numbers of impoverished and extremely impoverished people, the total projected figure of poor people by the end of 2020 is 214.7 million, or 34.7 percent of the region's population, while there will be a total of 83.4 million extremely poor people should their conservative projections prove accurate.

Latin America has long been the most unequal region in the world, and it remained so even after the so-called Pink Tide experiments of left- and centre-left governance in the early part of this century. That inequality feeds directly into deeply stratified underlying health conditions and health access among the population.

Poor Latin Americans and Caribbeans are more vulnerable due to the higher prevalence in this layer of the population to existing conditions like lung or heart disease, diabetes, and general lack of access to sufficient medical attention. Likewise, class injustice is interlaced and intensified by the complex and specific oppressions of gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race, disability, homelessness, incarceration, and migration – all of these will mean disproportionate suffering by specific sectors of the population.

Speaking at a general regional level – and thus necessarily concealing a heterogeneous reality – health systems in Latin America and the Caribbean tend to lack both skilled medical professionals and medical supplies.

There has long been an underinvestment in health by central governments, reaching an average aggregate regional level of only 2.2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Most countries of the region have fragile and unintegrated health systems, which have not and will not be able to cope properly with COVID-19 as the crisis expands and endures. In most countries public healthcare is only directed toward low-income sectors of the population, and thus is underfunded and inadequate. Formal sector workers are often able to access the health system through social security services attached to their employment. The rich and powerful rely on private healthcare, whether in their home countries or abroad. Again, with variation, health systems in the region tend to be unequal in terms of access and quality.

The region's medical supplies and inputs are heavily dependent on global health supply chains that are breaking down logistically and politically at the moment, and most states in the region cannot compete with the bulk-buying power of imperial states in the world system, which are able to monopolise purchases of tests and personal protective equipment, among other supplies and equipment. Hospital beds and ventilators per capita are in most countries remotely distant from what is necessary even in normal times.

To make matters still worse, several health systems in the region were already coping - or better, failing to cope - with an outbreak of more than three million cases of Dengue virus in 2019 - over 2.2 million cases in Brazil.

A partial exception to these trends is the Cuban example. As is well known, one of the major enduring successes of the revolution is the island's healthcare system, which has an unusually high number of doctors per capita, and a history of well-coordinated preventative care arrangements. Early regulation on incoming flights from abroad, strict controls of mandatory physical isolation, extensive medical surveys and widespread check-ups on households by medical students, among other measures, have translated into weeks of declining new

cases and a low death rate. The respective number of confirmed cases and deaths as of May 15 is 1,830 and 79. Continuing its history of international medical solidarity, Cuba has dispatched more than 2,000 doctors and healthcare workers to more than 20 countries, adding to the existing 37,000 Cuban medical personnel stationed in 67 countries around the globe. I say Cuba remains a partial exception despite these impressive details mainly because the internal economic contradictions in the country are severe, and the socio-economic fallout of declining remittances from the Cuban diaspora and a prolonged slump in tourism will likely have a serious impact on overarching conditions, even if the health system remains highly functional. The US sanctions regime persists, and could escalate in the lead-up to the American November elections.

RN: So on the one hand, the pandemic is lighting up the vast class disparities that exist in terms of public health and livelihoods. On the other hand, the pandemic is entering a region that has been wracked by a series of pre-existing crises - economic, political, social and ecological - as well as one of the largest waves of popular rebellions we've seen for quite some time. How is the pandemic interacting with and exacerbating these pre-existing crises across the region?

JW: I think the most important element to highlight at the outset is that many of Latin America's major economies - Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, in many respects Mexico as well - alongside many of its smaller economies, were already experiencing severe recessionary trends or low growth for the past several years. So there was a pre-existing economic crisis or recession in much of the region that was itself a kind of delayed reverberation of the 2008 crisis into Latin America.

That delayed reverberation was important in at least two respects. First, it was still mainly centre-left and left governments in office when the crisis started to really take hold in South America around 2012 and into

2013. And, second, to make a long story short, the centre-left and left governments which were in power shifted rightward by and large, implementing overt or disguised measures of austerity in response to the crisis, losing in the process significant swathes of their popular social bases while simultaneously failing in their bid to project "credibility" to capital. As a result they have been significantly weakened in political terms by that crisis, opening up opportunities for both extra-parliamentary and parliamentary forces of the right, including military expressions of the new right - depending on which country we are talking about. The right won elections in country after country, and where it couldn't win electorally it took power through a revival of hard coups (as in Honduras 2009), soft coups (as in Brazil 2016) or some mixture of the two (Bolivia 2019).

This was all pre-pandemic. So the pandemic is arriving in a situation in which you have three dynamics going on at once: newly formed right-wing governments in many countries; weakened and rightward-moving left governments where they remain; and, the main source of hope, new extra-parliamentary social movements - reaching semi-insurrectionary levels in places like Chile - especially in countries where the right is in power. This new protest wave, including the popular explosions in Ecuador, Colombia and Puerto Rico in 2019 (as part of an international uplift in radical protest that year), but also elsewhere in the region on a less visible scale, was rarely connected or well-integrated into any traditional left formations, especially given the relative delegitimation of centre-left and left parties from their recent time in office in a number of cases. At the centre of the protest wave in many locales has been a resurgent popular feminism, with an intensity and depth perhaps without historical precedence in the region, and ecologically-based struggles.

These, then, were three of the prominent pre-pandemic political dynamics. It should be stressed that the new right governments in office were very far away from enjoying some sort of new hegemony, in the

sense of replacing the old centre-left hegemony achieved at the height of the commodity boom. They were generally having difficulties governing, with very low rates of approval. In part, this is because they were unable to generate a kind of renewal of capitalist dynamism, a way out of the economic crisis – dependent as this has been in the region on the restoration of life in the world market. So as the viral pandemic arrives it is interacting with some of these basic political-economic scenarios.

Then you need to relate this to the basic crisis of capitalism on a global scale – insofar as the recent, robust rate of growth in Latin America between 2003 and 2011 was massively dependent on external dynamics – overwhelmingly, China's rapid industrialisation, high commodity prices, and so on. The latest projections of the International Monetary Fund suggest -3 percent global growth in 2020, which is a six percentage point contraction from the 2.9 percent growth rate of the global economy in 2019. The World Bank is predicting a fall of world trade of between 13 and 32 percent this year. According to the United Nations Conference on Global Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the value of global trade has already fallen by 3 percent in the first quarter of 2020, with an estimated quarter-on-quarter decline of 27 percent in the second quarter. Commodity prices, meanwhile, plunged by a record 20 percent in March, led by the collapse of oil prices.

These economic phenomena on a world scale will find particular transmission routes into Latin America – fall in export prices for both primary commodities and manufactured goods (the region's economy has become increasingly dependent on export earnings since the transition to neoliberalism in the 1980s, a subordinate incorporation into the international division of labour intensified rather than reversed under Pink Tide rule); declining terms of trade for the region; collapse of remittances from migrant labour; capital flight (both the withdrawal of foreign capital into safer assets as well as the capital flight of domestic Latin American capitalists as they, too, shift

their fortunes even more than usual into foreign banks and off-shore tax havens); breakdown of global value chains for those countries most heavily involved in manufacturing (Brazil and Mexico, especially); and a collapse in tourism (Caribbean small island states to be particularly brutalised by this factor, although its effects will be widely felt throughout Latin America and the Caribbean). ECLAC envisions an extraordinary contraction in 2020, with a -5.2 percent aggregate growth rate, which is well below projected rhythms in Africa, South Asia, or the Middle East.

This is a crisis of unprecedented scale and complexity, a truly global depression – the Eurozone, China, and the United States are all in turmoil. A global recession was already in motion prior to COVID-19, rooted among other things in problems of massive corporate, household and government debt, facilitated by quantitative easing, i.e. cheap money, alongside low rates of profitability, little investment, escalating inequality as cheap money flowed into speculative financial investment schemes, and so on. The viral pandemic has made this underlying economic trajectory monstrously worse.

At the heart of all of this is the monumental question of debt. On the one hand, there is the issue of debt weighing down centres of global accumulation such as the United States and China (a product of their response to the 2008 crisis), which, quite apart from all the unknowns that persist with regard to COVID-19, calls into question the viability of any massive counter-cyclical intervention reanimating these economies and in turn providing an engine source for the world market, as China briefly managed to do following the 2008 meltdown. On the other hand, as Adam Hanieh has demonstrated so effectively, there is the problem of the extraordinary indebtedness of countries in much of the Global South – and not just the poorest ones – which is inhibiting their ability to meet the public spending challenges necessary for any effective response to COVID-19. Even before the latest world conjuncture, two years ago, in 2018, 46 countries devoted more government spending to servicing

public debts than they did on their healthcare systems as a proportion of GDP.

In Latin America, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a surge in the influence of the World Bank, IMF, and Inter-American Development Bank. As key institutional vectors of imperialism they made access to lines of credit conditional on neoliberal structural adjustment programs. During the height of the Pink Tide era and the associated commodity boom these institutions receded dramatically from the regional picture. As the global crisis of 2008 made its entry into South America by 2012-2013, however, these institutions followed in its wake.

Before the pandemic, both Argentina and Ecuador had already entered into agreements with the IMF and both were struggling to repay their debts. Ecuador and Venezuela were also massively indebted to China – today, China is the world's biggest public creditor to the Global South through its Belt and Road Initiative, and, along with all the other imperial debt collectors, it is now calling for repayment from the impoverished states of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America to which it loaned hundreds of billions of dollars.

So-called emerging markets as a whole owe \$171 trillion in debt to a multitude of creditors. Debt restructuring will have to occur, but as the Financial Times has pointed out, it is ever trickier to coordinate primary creditors to allow for a haircut on debt repayments given that, unlike in the 1980s and 1990s when creditors were mainly banks and governments, dominant creditors today are an assortment of bond funds, the managers of which are signalling that they are ready to settle into long-term international legal disputes with recalcitrant governments and put a sustained squeeze on even the most hard-hit countries to extract payments for their investors.

All of this means that, already in crisis, Latin American states are now in situations of extreme vulnerability, although the specific channels through which the global crisis is

making its way into Latin America varies according to country and sub-region.

To make matters worse, alongside the economic crisis, there are the ongoing ecological contradictions of extractive capitalism. As Robert Wallace and others have pointed out, structural transformations in extractive sectors such as agro-industry worldwide – and associated patterns of planetary hyper-deforestation – are deeply associated with the origins of COVID-19 and potential future viral threats of a similar variety. It is no coincidence that within the dynamics of world capitalism, some of Latin America's most potent social struggles and conflicts between the reproduction of life and ecosystems, on one side, and the interests of capital, on the other, in recent years have been rooted in those sectors that express the particular regional manifestations of the rise of extractive capital globally – agro-industrial mono-cropping, oil and natural gas extraction and mining mineral extraction. Such battlegrounds are in today's altered world assuming novel dimensions, given what we know about the political-economic and ecological origins of COVID-19, and specifically its connection to agro-industrial food production, rural displacement, deforestation, and subsequent flow through global value chains, logistics processes, and so on.

So there's that crisis, the crisis of ecology. And then there's the crisis of social reproduction, with social reproduction understood in the broadest sense of the best new Marxist feminist analyses, as all activities extending through the realms of paid and unpaid gendered labour involved in the generational reproduction of the working class. This can involve everything from the unpaid toil of raising children and feeding and clothing family members, to the waged work of a teacher providing education, or a healthcare worker providing care to the sick.

In Latin America and the Caribbean women are particularly affected by the aggravated pressure on health systems because they constitute 72.8 percent of the total number of employees in the sector region-wide.

In addition to assuming the front-line crisis work in the health system as the pandemic spreads, women are disproportionately burdened with the excess social reproductive labour involved in quarantine, such as the caring and home-schooling of children. Paid domestic workers, accounting for 11.4 percent of women's jobs in the region, tend to be disproportionately migrants, indigenous or Afro-descendant women. They lack access to social security and increasing levels of unemployment as employer families readjust their home budgets in the face of the crisis. As is the case internationally, in Latin America and the Caribbean instances of domestic violence against women and children are intensifying in contexts of quarantine and collapse of household finances.

The social-reproductive elements of the Latin American crises were visible long before the pandemic, and they were raised to the foreground of political life in recent years through what is arguably the biggest wave of popular feminism in Latin American history. The last five years have seen massive movements in Argentina and Chile, and important feminist currents in Mexico, Brazil and elsewhere. The popular feminist movement in Chile, for example, was the most important articulating factor of largest wave of rebellions in that country since the fights against Pinochet at the end of the 1980s. Latin American popular feminism today possesses an extraordinary vibrancy.

Unsurprisingly, alongside this uptick in praxis, there has been an accompanying theoretical effervescence on the Latin American left, pivoting on conceptualizing the dynamics of social reproduction, and the inherent conflicts between the reproduction of life and the reproduction of capital.

Of course, the insights of the ecological and feminist struggles, important as they were in recent years, are still more important in the present scenario facing the region, and indeed the rest of humanity. The fact that these movements were among the stronger popular forces of recent years is one of the positive

factors that will play into the contending balance of forces between life and capital as we emerge from the first phase of the pandemic and disputes over the character of the "new normal" that will emerge to replace it. There are few moments in world history where the competition between the value of production for profit versus the reproduction of life has been so starkly posed.

So to recap a very complicated scenario: you have a viral crisis interacting with a crisis of capitalism at the global level and its specificity in Latin America; you have a crisis of ecology expressed in the intensification of extractive capitalism across all of these dimensions; and you have a crisis of social reproduction. All of this, of course, something we'll get into, is related to political crises of all sorts. Heuristically, I've spoken of many distinct crises, but these are actually better thought of as constitutive parts of a unitary crisis.

RN: That seems like a good point to move onto the immediate political consequences so far. How have capitalist states been responding to this multidimensional crisis? Depending on who is in power and where, are there any early indicators so far as to how they are dealing with this crisis?

JW: Let's start with Brazil as it is the most important expression of the far-right in office responding to this crisis, and is also the biggest economy in the region and the most powerful Latin American country geopolitically speaking. Brazil is also a kind of exemplary condensation of the kind of crises that predated the pandemic and that have been interacting with the pandemic.

In Brazil – as in the wider international alt-right ideological milieu of post-truth irrationalism – you already had a formal attack by the Bolsonaro regime on the legitimacy of scientific evidence and the pursuit of scientific truths per se. We witnessed this with regard to the question of climate change denialism – the fires in the Amazon last year were, according to Bolsonaro, a conspiracy conjured up

by NGOs, and, contradictorily, even if they did exist, it was the NGOs that set them alight in the first place - and myriad other mythologies and alt-right conspiracies of this sort, and even more bizarre ones. This was accompanied by legislative attacks on funding for healthcare infrastructure and scientific institutions alike. All of this meant that a kind of hyper-irrationalism, at the centre of all far-right positions historically, has meant that the most culturally authoritarian section of the Bolsonaro government - which is only about a third of the actual composition of the government, but a very important one, including the president himself - has seized upon the COVID-19 conjuncture and declared the virus a petty cold, a mere sniffle, nothing to see here, continue as usual.

Bolsonaro himself is widely believed to have tested positive for the virus, although he denies this, and continues to greet crowds of right-wing evangelical supporters with handshakes and smiles, interspersed with coughing fits. Bolsonaro's efforts from the executive to prevent people from physically distancing from one another, and the woefully inadequate economic measures the central government has taken in order to respond to the crisis, have meant persistent confrontation between the president and various state governments, including those of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where governors attempted to institute some measures with the resources available to prevent an even greater catastrophe. Luiz Enrique Mandetta, Bolsonaro's minister of health, refused to go along with the president's absurdities and rooted himself in the scientific advice of epidemiologists. He was consequently dismissed from his position and replaced by yes-man Nelson Teich, a private healthcare capitalist with a degree in medicine and an MBA in business management. Bolsonaro's wilful disregard for human life in the context of COVID-19 is on a par with Trump's. The historian Forrest Hylton has rightly labelled Bolsonaro "Brazil's Gravedigger-in-Chief".

Immediate schisms began to emerge from within the Brazilian regime as a result of Bolsonaro's cavalier

disregard for the scale of what faced the country. To be sure, these schisms were already apparent in the Bolsonaro government in a more subterranean form prior to the pandemic, with the key fissures cutting through what I have called elsewhere a faction of cultural authoritarians pivoting around the figure of the president and his Rio-based familial dynasty, including his notorious sons; then a faction of militarists, pivoting around the vice-president, but also extending into all echelons of the state, from ministerial to lower technocratic and managerial positions in sub-ministries and public enterprises; and, finally, a faction of neoliberal technocrats, including the minister of the economy, Paulo Guedes, and, until very recently, the minister of justice, Sergio Moro. To repeat, these schisms were already present, with the government seemingly being held together over its first year by some sort of always fragile adhesive substance.

After several months of initial stasis in power, the Bolsonaro government managed to pass the thoroughgoing pension reforms masterminded by Guedes, the key Chicago-Boy finance minister. As a result, the markets began to come back on board with the government, after they had grown sceptical of Bolsonaro's capacities over the initial months of the new government.

Now, however, in the midst of the pandemic scenario, the justice minister, Moro, has resigned, and called into question Bolsonaro's legitimacy as president due to his interference with the federal police, who are investigating his sons for corruption and involvement in other crimes, crimes that extend all the way down to the militias involved in the assassination of Marielle Franco. The new intensity of this neoliberal technocratic-cultural authoritarian schism is very serious, and could eventually spell the end for Bolsonaro's presidency.

Although I don't think it's obvious that he will be ousted from office - people have announced his immediate demise everyday since Moro resigned, a few weeks ago now. I don't think it's necessarily imminent, given that he

retains 30 percent support of the population, which has always been about what his core base was, and it really depends massively on what action the military decides to take. The military faction of the regime has always had an enigmatic relationship with the president, not always free of tension, despite the fact that Bolsonaro himself is an former army captain. What is key in the Brazilian situation is that Bolsonaro's flagrant disregard for scientific evidence, and the dispute with his own minister of health and a series of state governors who tried to introduce some minimal measures to contain the spread of the virus, have jeopardised the lives of millions of Brazilians. I think the most important and disturbing thing about the crisis of Bolsonaro's rule at present is that the fissures are not a product of pressure from below, and that therefore will not obviously benefit social movements and the left. The main dispute in Brazil today, which might end up undermining the president's rule, is a schism between the centre-right and the far-right, neither of which have a particular allegiance to even the limited formalities of liberal democracy - which isn't to say that they are the same as one another. An eventual fall of Bolsonaro from office would not give an obvious momentum to the left, even if it would be happily greeted, unless popular movements can somehow play a bigger role than they have in instigating his demise.

In Bolivia, the dictatorship that was set in place following the coup last October, which removed Evo Morales from office, has used the arrival of the pandemic to postpone scheduled elections that were already going to be highly questionable. So a consolidation of power, of sorts, has at least temporarily unfolded in the country under this far-right regime. The spread of the virus in Bolivia has so far been minimal, however, so its future destabilising effects remain unpredictable.

In Chile, there are political tendencies and counter-tendencies, the precise momentum of which remain difficult to discern with any precision. On the one hand, Piñera's regime has seemingly benefited in the short term, as the virus has provided cover for a

suppression of the popular movements of recent months. His approval ratings have gone from a low of 9 percent to 25 percent, and the use of security forces in the streets to enforce mandatory physical distancing has been met with wide-scale approval – the same security forces that were so roundly discredited only weeks earlier.

On the other hand, the momentum of street politics and, in particular, the militant feminist wave is unlikely to simply disappear. Rather, it is set to play a decisive role in the battles over the new normal to come, once street politics is once again a reasonably safe pursuit. Karina Nohales, a militant involved in both the Committee for Workers and Unionists and the International Committee of the country's most important umbrella feminist collective, the Coordinadora Feminista 8M, explained recently that, despite being locked down, activists have managed to launch a Feminist Organization of workers. It is envisioned as a space in which women and militant workers come together from the perspective of their labour, whether it be formal, informal, paid or unpaid. Nohales describes the initiative as seeking to unite, in this way, wide layers of Chilean non-unionised workers with existing trade union militants in a space where all can participate and contribute, realising in this way the potential power of Chilean workers which until now has remained fragmented. The uniting strategic horizon is the Feminist General Strike – precisely what will be needed in coming months and years.

In Ecuador, you have a situation in which Lenín Moreno already entered into an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, which involved austerity measures designed to hollow out public infrastructure and the social functions of the state, including healthcare. Austerity measures were at the heart of a popular rebellion in October 2019, which witnessed the rearticulation of a popular indigenous movement at the forefront of class struggle. In the context of the pandemic, the rightward trajectory of the Moreno regime is being further concretised, as he moves to renegotiate debt with

creditors and renew agreements with the IMF. As in Chile, it is difficult to imagine the momentum of the rebellions of October 2019 being completely eclipsed by the present interregnum.

In Argentina, where Alberto Fernandez sits at the head of a centre-left administration, the government is thus far enjoying a boost in popularity, despite a catastrophic economic crisis in which debt negotiations are ongoing and a major sovereign debt default is foreseeable in the near future. As I suggested, Fernandez took early, concerted action to enforce physical distancing measures, which won popular approval and also favourable treatment in much of the media. It helps to have Bolsonaro as the standard against which one is measured. The right-wing opposition has been discredited, and basically has subordinated itself to Fernandez's handling of the crisis. Mauricio Macri, leader of the preceding centre-right government, introduced a 23 percent cut to the health budget, further undermining the country's capacity to deal with the present crisis. Public health provision and the role of healthcare workers are being revalorised in the public consciousness in the midst of the crisis, laying the basis for future potential inroads against neoliberalism.

As Claudio Katz has explained, the pandemic managed to push the looming issue of debt repayment to the back burner, as public funding was immediately needed to service the viral crisis. Momentum has been behind a more confrontational stance with international creditors. At the same time, as elsewhere, Argentine social movements are crippled by their inability to assemble in the streets. There is a danger that the use of much-hated security forces to enforce mandatory physical distancing and isolation measures will be normalised post-pandemic, together with the extension of surveillance mechanisms. Illegitimate repressive measures taken by the security forces during the last couple of months have not been met with any reprisal from the Fernandez government. Alongside emergency cash-transfer measures that target informal workers and that seem to run

against the logic of neoliberalism, Fernandez is at the same time making austerity moves, such as delinking unionised workers' future salary increases from inflation increases. As is the case elsewhere, one also has to include in this measure of the conjuncture the increasing pressures from capital in Argentina on the government to fully reopen the economy, whatever the cost to lives.

RN: Could you say a bit more about what is taking place in Venezuela at the moment?

JW: Sure. There was another coup attempt against Nicolás Maduro. Until this latest fiasco, it would have been difficult to imagine a set of political events more farcical than that of Juan Guaidó's debacle in April 2019. In that case, likewise an effort to overthrow Maduro, Guaidó was only capable of mobilising a tiny faction of troops in the capital for a couple of hours, despite enjoying the full-throated support of the US and allied right-wing states all over Latin America. That earlier attempt revealed the limits of US imperial power in the region, given that it was obvious that they had played a decisive role in the coup plot. What the events of last April did not show was some kind of widespread popular backing of the Maduro administration or an indication of Maduro's success in the mind of the Venezuelan populace. Maduro's administration has been a disaster and has in my opinion no longer anything to do with the left. But obviously this has nothing to do with the question of opposition to imperialism as a matter of principle – it was a duty of all the international left to oppose the coup attempt by Juan Guaidó and the prospect of any potential US military involvement, or proxy involvement through Colombia.

The recent scenario involves some of these factors, but it is not obvious it enjoyed US backing, and whether or not that ultimately is shown to be the case, the whole endeavour was a complete and utter joke, hardly deserving of analysis. The usual instantaneous commentariat have compared it to the Bay of Pigs, but the events are not remotely comparable.

Effectively, Jordan Goudreau, a former

US Green Beret, special forces veteran, who served tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is now CEO of a Florida-based gun-for-hire mercenary enterprise called Silvercorp, coordinated the entire effort. The premise was to launch an attack on Venezuela by sea, seize an airport, kidnap Maduro, and fly him to the United States where he would face prosecution. Goudreau apparently ran training camps in anticipation of the assault on the Colombian Caribbean peninsula of La Guajira, adjacent to the Venezuelan border. The training camps were infiltrated from the start by Venezuelan government double agents, which accounts for the fact that, in the event, two boats were easily seized by Venezuelan troops, eight mercenaries were killed, and a couple of dozen Venezuelan accomplices were detained by the Venezuelan government, together with an American special forces operator from Texas named Luke Denman. It was over before it began.

RN: Let's end with the question of popular movements. Apart from some very limited strikes among sections of workers, and some protests by medical professionals, there appear to be no discernible and sustained patterns of popular struggle, at least just yet. This is not to say that the basis isn't being laid for such struggles in the very near future. What do you think are the parameters of these struggles that are currently being laid by this crisis?

JW: I agree with your assessment that this precise moment is a weak one for popular movements, who are unable to engage in their usual above-ground assembly and repertoires of contention. We can't know what's coming next, but we can speculate in a reasoned and relatively informed way, basing our analysis on the observable if contradictory tensions in the region's politics that are becoming visible.

In one direction, there is the potentially negative consequence of normalising a certain subservience to state authority in the wake of necessary cooperation around public health measures. The gravest dangers here are associated with the extension

and normalisation of military and police power into everyday governance of public life in parts of the region, and the danger this poses to the revival of popular protest once the lockdown phase of the pandemic draws to a close. Likewise, in Latin America and the Caribbean, as elsewhere, there has been an extension of corporate surveillance facilitated by state measures responding to COVID-19. Capitalist states, while engaging temporarily in public health measures, are ultimately orientated toward restoring conditions for profitability, and insofar as an extension and consolidation of the role of the coercive apparatus of capitalist states is necessary for establishing post-pandemic conditions favourable to capital, states are likely to pursue this kind of normalisation if it is not resisted.

Another issue is the basic one that, for the moment, because social movements are demobilised and are capable only of virtual coordination through social media and the like, political momentum and initiative is very much in the hands of state managers and capitalist interests. This advantage in the immediate field of contention could position them well in determining the subsequent terrain to follow.

Critically, capitalist states are accruing significant debts, and the ensuing economic depression will demand sharper decisions from state managers as to who pays for the accumulated debts, and who is to benefit from the conditions of the new post-pandemic normal. The battle to come in Latin America and the Caribbean in the immediate above-ground, post-pandemic period will likely be structured in the first instance by capital-led austerity drives.

At the same time, working in the other direction is the ideological factor of this multidimensional crisis, making more visible than normal all of the interlaced threads of contradiction, from ecology to social reproduction, as well as their connections to capitalism as a system. Critiques of the system of capitalism are likely to meet with a wider audience in the midst of this crisis. More visible to many is the

basic irrationality of the pursuit of profit over life, the basic irrationality of ecological degradation attached to the system, the basic irrationality of attaching no value to socially reproductive work in normal times in terms of wages and conditions, and then celebrating it as "essential" in times of emergency; cheering healthcare workers on, calling them heroes, but not actually paying them decently, or providing them with effective equipment. There is no automatic process of politicisation attached to this, but in times of immense crisis people are more open to universal change of worldview than at other times.

So what is being valorised at this moment in popular consciousness in many Latin American and Caribbean countries in crisis is the notion of public health as a priority over profits, essential workers as necessarily having value attached to them, public services as a necessity, free access to the means of life, and so on. When the theatre of politics shifts from the present subterranean underworld of living rooms to above-ground workplaces, streets and communities, so will surface the tendencies and counter-tendencies I've cursorily noted above. The balance of forces aligned behind each side, drawing on reservoirs of strength extant in the pre-pandemic period but necessarily altered by the social, economic, and ideological conditions of the pandemic itself, will help to determine the content and form of the new normal.

That contestation, in the midst of an unprecedented global depression, will define the parameters of class struggle in the immediate future in the region. The outcome is not preordained, as it never is, but especially because crises are unusually contingent periods, in which various competing exit routes are opening and closing over the course of each battle.

This crisis shares some features with global crises of the past, even as it has other, unprecedented characteristics specific only to this moment. Insofar as we can learn from past crises, it is certainly the case that they don't automatically produce gains for the left. Such success will be contingent

on strategies of intervention that mobilise and amplify the infrastructures of rebellion that exist where they do exist, flexibly respond to the genuinely novel

reconfigurations of politics, economics and society coming out of the pandemic, and audaciously refuse to shrink for the scale of the change that

is necessary simply to pull the emergency break and avoid disaster – after which and out of which a new world organised around our terms of life might be possible.

Trump Will Sacrifice Tens of Thousands to Reopen Economy, Win Reelection

18 May 2020, by **Dan La Botz**

Trump ended federal guidelines for dealing with the coronavirus such as social distancing and turned responsibility over to state governors, suggesting that they could reopen if their states meet certain preconditions, above all a decline in new cases. Already more than half of the states plan to lift many restrictions and begin reopening the economy, even though they do not meet the criteria. [56]

Health experts predict reopening now will lead to a surge in cases and deaths. With states reopening, the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation has doubled its estimate and now predicts that there will be nearly 135,000 deaths in the United States by the beginning of August. [57] One distinguished researcher believes that the U.S. death toll could reach 350,000 to 1.2 million. [58]

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control prepared detailed guidelines for reopening, including recommendations for child care programs, schools, religious groups, employers with vulnerable workers, restaurants and bars, and mass transit. [59] But, as *The New York Times* reported, "White House and other administration officials rejected the recommendations over concerns that they were overly prescriptive,

infringed on religious rights and risked further damaging an economy..." [60]

The alternative—more testing, more contact tracing, a more gradual approach—would mean fewer deaths, and is preferable, but also unlikely to revive the economy and certainly not before November. So Trump is not interested.

Reopening is Trump's reelection campaign. He needs a strong economy to win reelection in November, and to win he is willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet it is clear that his reopening strategy is likely to lead within a month to a second wave of infections, increased cases and more deaths, which will force more business closings. [61] Trump may not only take hundreds of thousands of lives, he could also destroy the economy in the process, and, ironically, lose the reelection.

Mark Zandi of Moody Analytics writes, "A serious second wave of the virus would be fodder for a cataclysmic double-dip recession and what would likely be considered an economic depression." He believes that with the best of conditions, that is the development of a vaccine in mid-2021, "the economy won't be in full swing and fully recovered until mid-decade." [62] The vaccine is key, but

based on comparison with development of other vaccines such as SARS and HIV, it has been suggested that we might have a vaccine as early as August 2021 or as late as 2036! [63]

The Second Great Depression is already here. Some 30 percent of small businesses have shut down and most others are operating at far less than capacity. The \$3 trillion relief packages—too small, poorly managed, and full of inequities—cannot save Main Street. Annie Lowry of *The Atlantic* magazine writes, "Across the United States, millions of small businesses are struggling, and millions are failing. The great small-business die-off is here, and it will change the landscape of American commerce, auguring slower growth and less innovation in the future."

While Trump's presidency becomes more authoritarian every day. All of this means that there will be no return to normal and that the struggle between capital and labor will take place on a completely new terrain. [64] (We turn to that in our next article.) What we need is an economic restructuring for people, not profits.

10 May 2020

Source ***New Politics***.

A trade union in lockdown

18 May 2020, by **China Labour Bulletin**

Wuhan's frontline medical staff, construction workers, sanitation workers, security guards, delivery drivers and community workers all played a vital role in combating the spread of the coronavirus and in maintaining the city's essential services during the lockdown. [65]

These workers were rightly praised for their efforts but at the same time, their basic labour rights were often violated and their attempts to seek redress were met with indifference.

The construction workers who laboured around the clock to build the Huoshenshan and Leishenshan hospitals in just ten days, for example, were employed without proper labour contracts, had insufficient protective equipment, and suffered frequent wage arrears. Moreover, several hundred workers were not allowed to leave Wuhan even after their 14 days' quarantine had been completed. They claimed they were locked in their dormitories with no pay and no ability to work elsewhere.

In another case, security guards stationed at a quarantine site in Hubei University were supposed to be paid 1,000 yuan a day but only received 250 yuan a day because the local government had contracted the security work out to a labour agency which kept the majority of the payment for itself.

In order to understand how local trade union officials responded to these blatant violations of workers' rights, CLB staff telephoned officials in the Wuhan Municipal Federation of Trade Unions and the Jiangxia District Federation of Trade Unions, where the Huoshenshan Hospital is located. All interviews took place on 27 March 2020.

Not only were the officials we talked to unaware of these incidents (which had all been posted and widely

publicised on social media), some claimed they were not responsible in any case because the hospital construction work was undertaken by the China Construction Third Engineering Bureau Co. Ltd., a provincial level company that does not answer to municipal officials.

Instead of protecting workers' interests, most trade union officials had been dispatched to assist with epidemic control work in local residential areas, examining residents' papers and conducting body temperature checks etc. An official in the municipal federation's propaganda department explained:

More than 80 percent of us are now working for community services. Personally, I am busy helping the medical teams from other provinces who came to help Wuhan, so I don't have time to answer your inquiries... Please call our duty office; it will make a list of all inquiries and report to a higher level.

However, the duty officer for the municipal federation at first denied that there had been any labour rights violations during the hospital construction, and then claimed it was unrealistic for employers to sign proper labour contracts under the extraordinary circumstances they were faced with:

Think about it! This is the Lunar New Year, everyone is focused on building a hospital in just seven days, and you want workers to sit down and sign employment contracts first? How dare you even propose such an idea?

He was equally evasive on the security guards' case and said the municipal union could not be bothered with minor details like whether certain groups of workers had actually joined a union or not.

Our union is managed on the basis of

administrative territories. If you want to know whether some workers joined a union or not, you have to ask the local union that is directly in charge. How could the municipal federation know about this? We are not responsible for these details.

The one official on duty in the Jiangxia District office was more sympathetic to our inquiries but he was likewise constrained by the union's rigid structure. He explained that the district federation had 30 staff members but 29 of them had been dispatched to various residential communities. As the only officer on duty, in addition to responding to telephone inquiries, he had to check the gate and register all vehicles and persons entering the building.

We suggested that a better use of the union's human resources would be to send staff to enterprises that had resumed production and help the enterprise union staff and workers there to ensure that occupational health and safety was maintained and that basic labour rights were protected. He said he would report this suggestion to the higher-level leaders, but added, "the union has to listen to orders and arrangements from the government first."

Trade union officials, like everyone else in Wuhan, have been under tremendous pressure during the last few months. However, the vast majority of frontline workers in the city still did their jobs without making excuses.

It is clear from our interviews that the trade unions in Wuhan were in a state of mental lockdown as well as in a physical lockdown. They could not escape from the narrow confines of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions' hierarchical structure and bureaucratic thinking, and simply followed orders from the local government. They were often blind

and indifferent to the very real struggles of workers on their doorstep and valued serving the Party and government above the interests of their members.

This attitude is unlikely to change now

that normal economic activity is resuming in Wuhan. However, workers in the city are still struggling with layoffs, wage arrears and other violations of labour rights. And, at some point, the union will be forced to listen.

For more details, and links to the original source material, please see our report on our [Chinese website](#)

4 May 2020

Source *Chinese Labor Bulletin*.

Phase 2: the capitalists want everything

17 May 2020, by **Franco Turigliatto**

At the end of the week we will be able to analyse the effects of the resumption of all productive activities, which dates 4 May. It is only then that it will be possible to know if a new total lockdown will be necessary - the person in charge of Civil Protection himself does not exclude this - or if the bars and restaurants can be reopened and other social structures, such as sports clubs and centres, resume. Schools will remain closed until the autumn.

A critical situation on several grounds

Beyond the announcements and the promises of several public organizations, the material resources which should, in phase 2, guarantee control of the epidemic, remain very insufficient. There are still millions of masks, gloves and serological tests missing and there are few swab tests because there is a lack of chemical reagents to check their results.

Three months after the start of the epidemic, neither Italian capitalism nor its state have been able to do what they had proclaimed: "Resume safely". Workplaces are not "safe": the National Employment Institute (INAIL) said that on May 4, there were more than 37,000 people infected at their workplaces, with an increase of 10% in deaths in the past few weeks. Every day 300 workers fall ill and ten die; the most affected are health and social care workers.

But it is also in the field of wages that

things are going wrong because a large number of workers affected by technical unemployment (there were almost 7 million), in particular those in commerce and small enterprises, have not yet received a single euro.

This situation gives rise to strong tensions between the central government and that of some regions which want to proceed immediately with wider openings, but also within the government itself, so much so that the economic decree of 55 billion announced for days is still being postponed. There are many points of difference: the PD and Renzi's Italia Viva are requesting the intervention of the ESM - to which the M5S is opposed; M5S wants to extend a form of basic income to the weakest sectors, while the others accept only a minimum and temporary support measure (2 or 3 months); PD and IV are convinced of the need to regularize migrants, while the M5S opposes this, maintaining a reactionary position.

Confindustria wants it all

The employers' class, on the other hand, goes straight to the point and has decided that the best form of defence is attack. The platform of demands put forward by the employers' organisation, Confindustria, laid out by its new president Bonomi, is very clear: it proposes to precisely adjust government policy to business requirements.

Technical unemployment, unemployment benefit, support for the weakest sectors, public intervention, all this, for Bonomi, is just wasted money: this money must be used instead as "immediate liquidity" for companies, exempting them from any form of control as to the use of subcontractors and environmental impact.

The bosses' targets:

- Deregulate as far as possible the use of the labour force to achieve the bosses' long-desired goal, the abolition of national contracts;
- Obtain large non-repayable grants to companies, without conditions and without state control;
- Suspension of corporate taxes, including the abolition of IRAP, the tax on productive activities created to finance public health;
- Elimination of all regulations that hinder the deployment of their business and entrepreneurial will,
- Derogation from, or perhaps even definitive revision of, Art. 2087 of the Civil Code, which

attributes responsibility to companies for accidents occurring or illnesses contracted in the workplace.

A response to be built

This is openly a declaration of war against the working classes, to which the unions should oppose a platform in defence of health, rights, reduction of

working hours, taxation that makes the capitalists pay the costs of the crisis, calling on the entire working class to mobilize to confront the looming conflict that is looming.

But, instead of denouncing the attack by Confindustria, they continue to dream of a new global social pact, contenting themselves with the crumbs that the government concedes to the popular classes to avoid (for the moment) too many social tensions, and by not questioning the huge new gifts made to the bosses.

We will see in the coming days what measures will be taken by government decree, but above all what will be the reactions of the most combative trade union and social sectors, to defend the health, work and income of all the exploited and oppressed, and also to resume full political and union activity and a presence on the streets, in the context of the safety measures that the epidemic requires.

13 May 2020

Original article [Sinistra Anticapitalista](#).

“This constant search for increased productivity will promote the spread of the virus”.

17 May 2020, by **Thomas Weyts**

Thomas Weyts: Hi Johan, you work in a company which is located in an essential sector, and you had to keep working. What has it been like at the workplace for the past few weeks? Have the safety rules been observed? How were the additional measures applied? Have you received materials like masks, soap and so on? How do the rules of social distancing work?

Johan: As employees, we have undergone constant adaptation of the rules. It is precisely because we were one of the companies considered essential that we witnessed an adjustment and a strengthening of the measures every week. In essence, strict hygiene was already necessary in our company, on the other hand we had above all to adapt to apply social distancing. The main problem was the shortage of masks in Belgium. Our union delegation, like everyone else, has been confronted with this completely new pandemic phenomenon. As for the government, its decisions in the first weeks were constantly fighting the last war! Will

the union also learn from this? Today, if you work in a warehouse or a production hall, with the best will in the world, you don't always manage to keep a distance between each other. It just isn't possible. There is always a time when you are in default to keep the production process functional. You can, as much as possible, limit the possibilities of contamination, but nothing more.

TW: Since 4 May all kinds of businesses are once again allowed to operate fully, subject to a series of safety rules. What do you think about this?

J: I have a contradictory feeling. You should know that due to all the austerity policies carried out in the past, many families are simply in chronic financial difficulty. Even with technical unemployment, it is therefore difficult for many working families to keep their heads above water. Keep in mind that the median income is 1,700 euros. It's not much in the face of high housing costs and food prices. There is therefore enormous pressure to return to work!

On the other hand, in Belgium we experienced a gentle lockdown. Most of the workplaces that started closing did so from pressure from below. There was pressure from workers on the ground who no longer wanted to work without ad hoc sanitary measures because the employers had planned nothing. Yet most of them continued to work almost as if nothing had happened.

The question now is whether it will be possible to return to work. It is no coincidence that in Italy the centre of gravity of the pandemic is in Lombardy, the industrial heart of the country. The goal of business is to work as efficiently as possible for high productivity, which is at odds with “fighting the virus” during a pandemic. These are two opposite values because it is precisely this constant search for increased productivity that will promote the spread of the virus.

The question is whether one is effectively able to work with the current means of production and in the current production method

without spreading the virus. Telecommuting is very practical when possible, but when you are a worker whose physical presence is essential to their work, you put your whole family under pressure and in danger. I do not know how much I endanger my wife or my children. To be sure to protect them, I should actually live separately, away from my family. Yes, many of us really felt like shareholders' cannon fodder. And all those who now return to work can also inadvertently endanger their families.

TW: What do you think unions should do in the coming days in workplaces? What do you think of the idea that employees and their unions should have a veto over whether or not to reopen a workplace?

J: It is clear that unions are already very active in the area of workplace safety. On the issue of the veto: in the end, that is to say that when people do not do the work, there is no production. It's as simple as that but as everyone knows, the union is strong ... only when the workers support it. The members of the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work (CPPT) must do their work as delegates. This right of veto therefore already exists, but it must be organized within the framework of a collective agreement.

TW: You and your partner who currently works at home also have school children. How have you been dealing with them in recent weeks? As parents, what do you think about the fact that schools could resume for a very short time? How to reconcile work and tutoring and childcare throughout the day?

J: We were already working parents before lockdown, you know. If you work as a team, you are nothing more than that: parent-workers. We are doing well, but half of the week, in turn, we are practically single for our family. It was our reality before the Covid-19 crisis, it is still ours today. However, we have fairly good accommodation with a courtyard and a good income. But for many families who live in a city apartment, in total isolation, the past few weeks must

have been hell.

It is clear that the government is not focusing on the families of essential workers, but on those of the upper middle class. It is incomprehensible and deeply unfair to have allowed garden centres to reopen first. You are allowed to jog and bike, but not to play soccer with your five-year-old son. All the measures currently being taken to ease lockdown are in fact aimed at those who are already able to relax at home. It is so unfair that the owners of a second home by the sea are promised a piece of beach when it belongs to the community. At the same time, the people who saved the economy and kept society alive continue to be deprived of any opportunity for leisure! How is it possible? Take a simple example: a visit to the zoo. Well, for me, it would be socially normal to offer poor families a free subscription at this time. Especially when you know that 20% of children live in poverty, they would have at least a breath of fresh air (this would give a social veneer to the way the government is managing the crisis!). Symbolically, it would be much stronger than reopening garden centres so that the middle classes can shop there.

If the government had a little "social reflex", it would give families with few resources priority in the opportunity to let their children go back to school (with of course all the necessary safety measures). It would be a social measure that, moreover, would lighten the burden of crowded classrooms. These children could have benefited from more support during the Covid-19 crisis. But now, it is well known that if you are born to a poor family in Belgium, you have fewer opportunities. That said, I think what my kids are missing most today is exercise and the outdoors. This is their greatest deprivation. Fortunately, to keep them occupied, we had the financial means to provide them with tablets and a PC. But if we had not had them, it would have been impossible to take the courses at home. All school assignments have been sent online. My 8 year old daughter keeps her social life thanks to the tablet. She talks to her best friends for a few hours each day. My 5 year old son is fortunate to have a

large room where he can let his imagination run wild. Is it ideal? No of course not. We were hoping that at least the schools would restart instead of the stores. We believe that the reopening of stores is only a measure of support for the economy. The government has decided to support the independent traders a lot, but who will go shopping in these circumstances? The victims of this choice are therefore, in our view, children.

TW: What do you think unions and the left should be tackling in the weeks and months to come?

J: A friend of mine, Freddy, wrote on Facebook, something I also fear: "My fear is that the world will then be very similar to the world before, only worse". If we see that the big ones (the multinationals) are about to swallow up the small ones, this fear seems justified. How can we already calculate that half a billion people in the world will fall into poverty ...? And think of all those daily operations that threaten to change drastically or disappear. Cash payments have become the norm, collecting more data every day and further reducing privacy. Data which may be subject to commercial and political abuse. Homework, which eliminates horizontal contacts and solidarity in a workplace, reduces employees to having only individual contacts with their superiors or bosses. Which is not ideal for union work, for example. Even more online shopping, which suits Amazon, but further impoverishes social life and small businesses. What about already significant price increases? I am curious to see how the pressurization in the name of the crisis that will come from the business world will slow down the fight against climate change and the reduction of CO2 emissions. And then, still in the name of the crisis, they will claim that everyone will have to make sacrifices, but that while waiting for better days, the fight against tax evasion and tax havens must be muted! And why while we are at it not also invoking the fight against the virus to restrict the right to demonstrate?

In truth, I fear very much that they will begin to apply the doctrine of

shock strategy to the letter. Naomi Klein's book of the same name explains perfectly how capitalism uses this kind of crisis to reinforce neoliberalism. We can already see this in the measures adopted. In Ghent, which is ruled by a progressive-liberal majority, the city wanted social workers in CPAS rest homes to give up their holiday pay (the measure was withdrawn after protests from unions and the PTB in the municipal council). All this happens while these same politicians applaud the care staff! How can they be so hypocritical? But even progressive governments are tied to the societal model of capitalism.

Did the government promise nurses a bonus? The idea has been abandoned ... While the epidemic is still raging,

the first thing they do is get rid of the "heroes" and their bonus.

Because the hidden objective is to take advantage of this crisis to demolish all the gains of the working class, with the trade union movement, we must counter-attack. But as a union, what we sorely miss is an alternative vision that offers a deeper change than a better distribution of the pie. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, what is the project of society for the left that goes beyond the horizons of capitalism? With what ideological alternative can we get to work to build a just society?

Our unionism, based on the Social Pact, is a concerted unionism, but will this already weakened model survive this crisis? The question we have to

ask ourselves is what kind of unionism we should practice in the future. The old model of combative unionism based on the pioneering role of a series of big workplaces is no longer enough and concerted unionism is under great pressure. Trade unions are facing major challenges but at the same time, the trade union movement in Belgium has remained standing; if there is now a country where we, as trade unionists, can look for a new way, it's very much here. But none of this will happen by itself, as we will as always have to fight for it.

11 May 2020

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from **Gauche Anticapitaliste**.*

"This would be tantamount to a de facto ban on abortion".

16 May 2020

CN: The feminist collective "Dziewuchy Berlin" has warned of the precarious situation Polish women find themselves in, as the corona crisis has limited abortion access even more. What is the connection between the pandemic and abortion access?

HG: Around a thousand legal abortions take place in Poland every year. However, this option is only possible for a very limited number of cases, which is why it was common for many women to go abroad toward this end, for example, to Great Britain or Germany - while thousands of dangerous abortions that take place every year in criminalized, underground circumstances. However, now that the borders have been closed in the wake of the corona crisis, affected women have little chance to make decisions regarding their lives or bodies.

CN: Under what conditions can

abortion be performed in Poland?

HG: Abortions may only be performed in three cases: following a rape, if the mother's health is at risk or if the fetus is terminally ill. Nearly every abortion performed in Poland is based on the latter grounds.

However, the right-wing Polish government attempted to make the situation more difficult for those affected even before the corona crisis, didn't it?

The attempt to ban abortions in Poland started as early as 2016. There were extensive demonstrations against this project. Two years ago, another debate on this question was held and a bill was proposed to remove the aforementioned third case.

The law was initially referred to committees for consultation, and if it were to go through, it would be tantamount to a de facto ban on abortion. In addition, sexual education

in schools would be banned and punishable by three years in prison.

The project was initiated by an extremely right-wing, very religious civil organisation, an association called "Life and Family". According to surveys, the majority of the population opposes this law and even supports the legalization of abortion.

In October we had elections in Poland, and as a result, all the existing legislative projects must be re-opened to debate within six months. In mid-April, the draft was adopted by Parliament at first reading. It is not yet clear what the next steps will be.

CN: Were you able to demonstrate against this new repressive progression in the current circumstances?

HG: Yes, several protests took place online. In addition, we, the collective "Dziewuchy Berlin", met at the Warschauer Brücke in Berlin-

Friedrichshain and wielding black umbrellas, a symbol of the protest – we practiced social distancing and masks, of course, but we also held up banners and posters.

It was important for us to signal our opposition and our demands – for example, the legalization of at-home medical abortion – in a visible and creative way, despite the quarantine.

In Poland, a motorcade and a road blockade were formed in the Warsaw city center. Women also protested in

queues outside supermarkets. It should be noted that the restrictions in the country are very strict due to the corona pandemic and people have to wait for entry in front of shops at a distance from one other.

From our point of view, the protests were quite successful, even if the result is a rather unpleasant aftertaste: The law hasn't been passed, but it hasn't been rejected either.

CN: What is the nature of your collective "Dziewuchy Berlin"?

HG: Our group was founded four years ago when the debate on an abortion ban began in Poland. Ever since, we have been campaigning for the right to self-determination of Polish women and trying to draw attention to their situation in Berlin by organizing lectures, taking to the streets, and networking with other feminists.

Translation by Emily Pollak for [The Left Berlin](#).

Holding Covid-19 at bay in Venezuela

16 May 2020, by **Stalin Pérez Borges**

Aurora González: Why has the collapse of international oil prices not yet affected the Venezuelan economy as we might have expected?

Stalin Pérez Borges: The fall in oil production is what is hitting our economy and our international currency income the hardest. Production today is estimated to be 600 million barrels per day. If this is accurate, then the scandalous collapse in oil prices doesn't affect our income all that much. But we will feel the impact three months from now which is when payments for oil sold at current prices will come due. The fall in oil production and refining itself in Venezuela is what is hurting our economy the most and the fact that the government, after so much time has passed, has done little to turn this situation around when they could have done much more.

AG: What will countries like yours – countries that have as many resources as yours does – have to do to find a way out of the current situation.

SPB: Yes, we have a large variety of mineral resources, natural riches, agricultural potential, and a geographic location advantageous to maritime transportation. Given all

this, we are in a privileged position. We believe in developing these possibilities and have bet that we will see the results. But what is the point of producing 3 or 5 million barrels of oil if half of it is pillaged between internal market managers and various departments in PDVSA (the national oil company) before it ever reaches the national coffers or the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV)? And why bother refining a quarter of that production if those who run gas stations and the working class don't have sufficient incomes, or if worst of all, the oil workers themselves don't even have dignified salaries? So, as a first step, if we don't punish corruption, we are screwed.

A whole century of oil exploration in Venezuela has passed, and it would cost us enormously to develop the production necessary to make us the "Venezuelan power" that Maduro likes to talk about. Oil isn't the mana from heaven it used to be. And this isn't only because prices today are near zero. But because, as a source of energy, oil is chiefly responsible for the second great cause of today's unprecedented global crisis, that is, environmental pollution and the destruction of nature. Thus, any ventures that rely on oil must be carried out with extreme care and a high degree of environmental

consciousness less they be transformed into ecological crimes that merely was time and cost lives.

AG: You make an eloquent case but will oil and gas production really be reduced? It seems to me you are reflecting on some of the biggest problems facing your country and the increasingly uncertain situation in which our planet finds itself. Would you agree?

SPB: There are no plans for recovery or re-starting and leveraging production, however successful they may be on their own terms, that will serve our purposes if we are not clear about need to fight corruption. Notice that I say fight. Corruption will be there. But, the heart of the problem is: do you fight and punish those who perpetrate corruption or not? And the answer will determine which direction our lives take. This has not been done in Venezuela. We have not encouraged people's creative powers in work and social life in all sectors of production and in all social strata. If we did that, which is what I insist on and propose we must do, we will see the results.

AG: The world is being hammered by the Covid-19 pandemic. How do you think this will affect the world economy and what social

consequences will emerge in terms of jobs, wages, and the population's quality of life?

SPB: This crisis is a threat to the world itself and its consequences raise the potential for still more problems. The coronavirus, whose origins remain to be determined, has accelerated a pre-existing economic and environmental crisis and produced still more damage. The preventative measures taken by various governments to contain the pandemic show that global capitalism is as lethal to human life as Covid-19 itself. This exposes the contradictions facing the Trumps and Bolsonaros who find themselves pushed up against the wall. Will they defend capital, privileging production and profits, or will they preserve and value public health and the lives of their populations? Faced with this dilemma, they prefer to defend capital.

But there are millions of workers have been laid off without salaries, forcing some countries to revert to providing bags of food for families and special subsidies and government payouts. And there are already millions who don't even receive that. Billions are already starving and living in misery. The International Labor Organization has stated that the drop in employment is catastrophic. And predictions by supposed economic experts warn that the next few months will be much worse.

AG: Can you describe what has

been done in Venezuela in the fight against the spread of Covid-19?

SPB: I will repeat what I have said many times before. Fortunately, the Venezuelan government has done a good job in combating the spread of the coronavirus. In other words, the President of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro (keeping in mind that he is the only president) has demonstrated how to act in the fight against COVID-19. Thus, our country has not been affected as badly as others. Here there has been a combination of good government action, extraordinary participation by sectors of the social movements, and a majority of the people who have shown how to respect the quarantine and its regulations.

In terms of surveys that ask about potential infections, almost 19 million people are said to have participated. As of May 1, less than 350 coronavirus infections have been reported with fewer than 10 Covid-10 deaths. I acknowledge what Maduro has done in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus because this raises hopes that he will see that this kind of work done in conjunction with the social movements and the people could also be applied to struggles against speculation, in the struggle to improve the economy, to raise industrial and agricultural production, and to improve social conditions.

And I say openly to him that, if you really want to fight those struggles, then don't only listen to, and meet exclusively with, politicians like Delcy and Jorge Rodríguez, with Oil Minister Tareck El Aissami, with National Assembly powerbroker Diosdado Cabellos, and with Defense Minister Padrino López. Listen to your old compañeros who worked beside you as part of the Bolivarian Federation of Workers (FBT), listen to the social movements. Try to sit down and listen patiently to the many people who really want Venezuela to be the country that Hugo Chávez and many others like you have dreamed of.

I don't know that we have a workers' president, although you come from the working class and you know how to defend the interests of that social class and other oppressed peoples. I don't know that we have a socialist president either, despite more than 20 years of socialism in speeches but not in tangible reality. Yes, Comrade Nicolás – if you continue to see me as a comrade – what we continue to hope for is a Socialist Venezuela because our grandchildren are facing a future of barbarism. Do your part to get to that Socialist Homeland.

1 May 2020

Source: This interview with Stalin Pérez Borges was conducted by Aurora González, coordinator of the Resisto reporting network on May 1, 2020. It was translated by [No Borders News](#) and abridged for publication.

Travis Watkins: Fighting General Motors Amid the COVID Pandemic

15 May 2020, by Travis Watkins

Travis, tell us what happened.

On March 16th, I received a few phone calls from inside the plant. Some workers were telling me that a couple of members had been driven out on a medical cart by security

wearing facemasks and that they were being removed from the plant for suspected Covid-19 symptoms. I reached out to my local leadership to try to organize to protect us all. I did not hear back from our local leadership and the very next morning

when I came in to work, I was told by a supervisor that I was immediately being put on suspension pending an investigation. When I inquired as to what the suspension was for, he said he didn't know. I had him call labor management at my company, Caravan,

and they weren't able to provide me with any information.

The following day, I was called to a meeting with plant management; I had an international representative with me. I was told I was being terminated. As the reason, they quoted a Shop Rule Violation 2, which is assaulting, fighting, threatening, coercing or interference with employees or management. And they provided a Facebook post that I had made inside of a private Facebook group that deals with on-the-job site conditions and union member concerns. All the post said was it had been reported to me that some people had been walked out of GM with suspected Covid-19 symptoms and I had reported it to local leadership. That was the reason they used to terminate me.

In your discussions with both union leadership and GM, to the extent you could talk to them, you raised health and safety concerns.

Yes. On March 16th, I saw a General Motors high level manager passing out bottles of cleaner to a worker in the bargaining unit I represented and also to a worker in the GM bargaining unit. And I stopped him and asked him what was going on and what they were doing. And he said, well, we're beginning some cleanup of work station areas to disinfect for Covid-19.

And I noticed there was no personal protection equipment, that these employees hadn't been trained on the proper ways to mitigate and clean up for Covid-19. And I said, you know, unless you guys can provide the proper protective equipment as listed by CDC or OSHA, like facemasks and gloves and in some cases hazmat suits and so forth to do this cleanup, we weren't going to do it and it was a health and safety issue and he needed to address that. He got frustrated and angry because he had to stop what he was doing. But, again, the following morning, I was terminated.

You've been really active in the union, co-founding United Auto Workers for Democracy, you have been elected to the local's executive board, and you were thinking of running for president. It seems pretty likely that someone

in the union, someone not interested in having you challenging local leadership gave management the information about your Facebook page post.

That absolutely did happen in my case. It was reported to me and verified from another very good source. And when GM recently answered a formal whistleblower complaint I made, they acknowledged that the Facebook post had come from the President of our Local. He was complicit with them to initiate my termination. That is a fact.

One thing puzzles me. Why is GM so insistent on keeping the factory operating when demand is going down and they have a stockpile of new cars ready for sale?

First they are only reopening one of the three shifts. Before COVID, since the September-October 40 day strike, the plant was operating 24 hours a day 6 days a week, and for some continuously for weeks, paying lots of overtime. They were pumping out product. Today's reopening is just partial. Second, even in just-in-time production, they try to keep a considerable supply of parts because they want to be able to weather a strike. Even the recent UAW national 40 day strike seemed to me not a serious strike, called to let workers blow off steam. If you want to threaten GM nowadays, you have to prepare for a long, long strike.

Let's switch gears. How did workers feel about being forced to work during the pandemic?

People are fearful of getting the virus. But they don't want to lose their jobs. As you may know, the companies and the international union have set up another joint task force with this health and safety issue. It's a lot of people's belief that this has left members at risk. Instead of the international union addressing issues on a local level—providing information, education and support, health and safety in the plants—they again partnered with the company in this joint task force and it just delayed shutting down these plants. Which were only closed when the governor ordered a full shut down of non-essential work. Now the joint task

force is working on an agreement about reopening the plant, and not conferring with local leadership. And they are not using any leadership at the local level to address the issue. It seems to me and many other members that they're putting the company first—mitigating the company's loss of profits by compromising the health and safety of workers.

So, people are afraid. They don't want to lose their job. They're afraid to speak out for the reasons that I find myself in now. But as a local leader, that's my responsibility to stand up for the membership and to make sure that they're safe on the job. That's just what we're trained to do; that's what we're supposed to do; and it's the right thing to do.

How are you fighting to reverse your firing?

My grievance has now moved to the 3rd Step. It now takes the grievance process out of local representatives' hands and moves it into the hands of my International (UAW) Regional Servicing Rep. Dan Kosheba (UAW Region 1-D) and my company's (Caravan?Facility Management) operation manager Mark Stillman. My opinion is that the company, rather than admit any wrong doing, will stall this process and force this issue in front of a referee at arbitration. This process is known to take quite some time.

I have also filed NLRB charges against the company for three separate violations. In my opinion, the grievance process cannot be handled appropriately or with proper representation due to the company refusing my representative's legal request for information. If the NLRB agrees, instead of deferring my case until the grievance process is handled, which is normal protocol, they may be able to take my case earlier.

In addition to the NLRB charge, I also filed a whistle blower complaint with OSHA and Caravan answered. Besides acknowledging that the Local President has given them my private Facebook post to union members, Caravan's answer just used boilerplate language to the effect that the termination was proper and had

nothing to do with my effort to warn fellow workers.

What kind of support are you getting from other union members?

On the day of my termination the 30 some workers in my unit sent a petition to Caravan to have me reinstated. On May Day UAW members and labor activists held a peaceful and safe protest at the GM factory in Wyoming MI. The protest took place with a car caravan around the facility with signage and horns going. I was humbled to see so many people, many of them UAW retirees, coming together in solidarity to protest my unjust discharge. I should note that Local 167 took no part in the protest and Local 167 President Willie Holmes denied many requests to gather in the hall parking lot as a place to meet before the protest. This was not for any safety related issues (again, no one left their vehicles), but because they did not agree to protest. Finally, Frank Hammer, a former UAW local president and bargaining chair and IUAW rep has started a change.org petition to demand my reinstatement. It currently has about 1500 signatures.

How are GM and Caravan doing about safety issues in order to re-open?

Businessmen everywhere are pushing for early reopening and Michigan's Governor Whitmer is complying. While extending Michigan's stay at home order to May 28th and implementing testing and tracking programs, she has allowed manufactures including the big 3 automakers to open on May 18th with an understanding that the manufacturers will meet high standards of health and safety.

The plants have made some health and safety changes, not enough in my opinion. In fact I have yet to see a "set" protocol in "Black and White" from either the International or the companies. There was an initial push to return workers on May 4th, but as you know that's been pushed back because these plants were not ready and the health and safety of our citizens in this COVID-19 crisis did not make this date viable or reasonable.

While the tentative date for the return of the day shift is May 18th, the workers in my unit were called in to work on May 11th to do disinfecting as well as install hand sanitizers. I am told the companies will be providing 2 face masks per day as well as gloves, will require social distancing and allow time for clean up between shifts. But no one will be tested for COVID. Instead, workers entering the plant will be thermal scanned for high temperatures which is ineffective in my opinion because a great deal of COVID-19 carriers are asymptomatic. And they will be given a questionnaire. This appears to me as a way of forcing workers to answer yes to all the questions, and many of the questions seem designed to give GM grounds for contesting legal liability, if the worker gets COVID. All decisions as to required health and safety provision are still being made by the UAW-Company "safety task force".

I'm worried, obviously, there's pressure to get the economy running, but worker health and safety must take precedence over profit. Many experts agree that opening the economy now risks devastating consequences in this crisis.

Travis, you have a GoFundMe campaign going. Tell us about it.

Right. I started a GoFundMe page because myself and my family are "obviously with this attack from the company on my livelihood" I'm now without employment. And I have not yet been able to get unemployment benefits. Because the company terminated me, I had to file under misconduct which subjects me to additional delays and loopholes to get my claim settled. As of today, I have yet to receive any determination or money from unemployment and my family is still without income or health insurance.

Also, I have high prescription costs for my family. They have "some of my children have medical needs, and I'm without insurance. So, that's the reason I started a GoFundMe page to kind of get caught up on some bills and some of these prescription costs that I have for my family. And I've had some great contributions, people have been very generous, and I very much appreciate it and my family appreciates it very much.

Travis, thanks for talking and your work. As we discussed in preparing for the interview, if GM/Caravan manages to get away with firing you, then others in the plant will hesitate to report health and safety violations. Keep up the struggle.

Thanks, Bill. I really appreciate the time and the interest that you've taken and giving me the opportunity to speak out on this health and safety issue to keep the membership safe.

This interview is an edited version of an interview of Travis Watkins by Bill Resnick of [The Old Mole Variety Hour](#) on KBOO radio, 90.7fm Portland, OR. Republished from [Solidarity](#).

Statement by Anticapitalistas on leaving Podemos

14 May 2020, by Anticapitalistas

We consider that the collective experience of Podemos, of which we were co-founders, has been full of interest and will always be part of our history, as well as the history of Podemos. The reasons that led us to participate in the founding of this organization are well-known. It was necessary to form a broad and radically democratic political force, strongly linked to the struggles and social movements, capable of challenging the economic, cultural, and political power of the elites, and reversing the effects of an aggressive and uncontrolled neoliberalism. With a vocation, of course, to think and build an overall political alternative to ecocidal and patriarchal capitalism.

We believe that these goals are still valid, but that, at this point, Podemos has ceased to be the space from which Anticapitalistas can contribute to this. We have often stated our positions and contrasted them in a comradely spirit with the other currents of the left. Unfortunately, Podemos is not today the organization that we aspired to build at first: the organizational model and the internal regime based on centralizing power and decisions in a small group of people linked to public offices and the general secretary leaves little space for collective pluralist work. Obviously, this model

has not proved at all effective for advancing in the social field: the militant organization and the force from below that Podemos used to enjoy has been diluted, disorganized and evaporated with this model, without this having translated, as they claimed in order to justify it, into an improvement in the electoral results.

Podemos was born as a political movement contesting the economic and political norms of the system. It is obvious that the strategy has changed. For Podemos, the “possible” has been progressively reduced over the years: in our view, the task remains to make what is necessary possible. The culmination of this drift is the strategy of co-governing with the PSOE. Once again, a left-wing project is subordinated in the short term to the logic of the lesser evil, agreeing to give up its policies in exchange for little or no decisive influence on the council of ministers. Despite the government’s propaganda, the coalition’s policies do not break with the orthodox economic framework, do not wager on a redistribution of wealth, on radically strengthening the public sphere and on disobeying the neoliberal institutions. Of course, we will support all the gains made within this framework and we will fight

together against the extreme right. But in a context of deep systemic crisis, we believe that an effort to advance in democracy and social justice necessarily goes through building social strength, ambitious policies and preparing a confrontation against the elites.

The coming months and years will be the scene of great battles between the classes. The current crisis is not a temporary one: it is a systemic, economic, ecological and care crisis. It will involve major political, cultural and social realignments. Nothing that we believe today is certain will remain the same. Our commitment to building an anti-capitalist movement open to all kinds of struggles and experiences allows us to look to the future in an open way and there is no doubt that we will find ourselves in many common struggles with the people of Podemos.

As soon as the social and health situation allows us to do so, we will hold a political conference of Anticapitalistas, to discuss in depth our proposals for the new phase.

14 May 2020

Translated by International Viewpoint from Anticapitalistas.

From Invisible to Essential: Worker Struggle in the COVID Pandemic

14 May 2020, by Al Bradbury

Al, today we’ll be discussing worker challenges to their employers during the COVID epidemic - about health and safety and pay, and also of worker challenges to what the corporations like to call

management prerogatives. In winning the right to collective bargaining, trade unions in the U.S. accepted a limitation, that management had prerogatives - the right to make unilateral decisions about products,

investments, Board appointments, advertising, political contributions, the equipment and organization of production. These could not be bargained or be the reason for a strike. Still workers, union and no union, had their own

ideas about the company and in daily struggles challenged these so-called prerogatives in one way or another. And over the last several months these worker challenges to management prerogatives came loud and clear, and in some places successful, sometimes under the banner, “from invisible to essential.”

First Al, let's get to the bread and butter issues, particularly health and safety. I just interviewed Travis Watkins who I learned about through the Labor Notes website. Travis' story is just one of many now occurring in this country. Give us a sense worker struggles today.

Autoworkers are one of many sectors where one of the first things workers did was organize to demand to close down nonessential work—auto plants and many other kinds of plants and workplaces. The employers were slow to close down, wanting to squeeze as much profit out as they could, even as workers discovered that their coworkers or supervisors were getting sick and experienced the reality of not being able to socially distance at work, not having the protective gear they need. Autoworkers had walkouts and demanded to shut their plants down—which they did, although the auto companies almost immediately began making rumblings about wanting to reopen those as soon as possible.

There are also less-organized, large-scale sickouts in many sectors. Meat and poultry plant workers, for instance, many of them immigrants, were not going in to work in large numbers and sometimes effectively closing down plants. The Trump administration lashed back, invoking the Defense Production Act to keep the plants open and insulate the companies from liability when workers get sick. These plants were already death traps for workers, and now even more so. To make them safer, a necessary step would be to slow the lines—but instead the administration is using the crisis as cover to grant waivers to speed them up even more.

But it's inspiring to see how many of the workers who are considered essential, in all kinds of sectors, are

organizing to demand the protective gear they need, or extra compensation for the risks that they're taking, or to rearrange their work to make it safer.

One example that I found really heartening early in the crisis was a wildcat strike by bus drivers in Detroit, who didn't wait for the employer to decide; they shut down the buses and said before we go back to work, we have some demands about how the buses need to operate differently to be safer during this crisis. They won all of their demands. One of them was no collection of bus fares for the duration of the crisis, which certainly makes drivers safer during the pandemic because they don't have such close contact with people. The enforcement of the fare is also one of the sites of conflict and violence that puts drivers at risk of workplace violence every day. And in this recession, a free commute is a great boon to the public. So, that kind of change, where workers got together and said we see how we could improve the situation at our work and demanded it and won it, that spirit is something I hope we can keep even after the crisis is over.

Another issue with profound implications, service workers are now rallying under the banner from invisible to essential. Those delivery truck drivers and homecare workers and cleaners and grocery workers and health workers, many at the lowest level, cooks and restaurant workers, they're now being seen and seeing themselves as essential, as skilled and necessary, which we on the left always knew and tried to argue. This crisis is an unforgettable wakeup call, for workers and for the society, that fuels demands for respect and a decent wage.

Absolutely. I think there's both the public awareness of the importance of so many workers who are often overlooked, and the workers' own awareness of the power that they have, that society really can't continue without them. It's long overdue that we should celebrate sanitation workers, transit workers, postal and delivery workers, grocery and warehouse workers, healthcare

workers. So often their voices are ignored and suppressed, and their concerns are pushed down by management. This is a moment of tremendous opportunity for workers to build connections with the public, because all of us are seeing every day the risks workers are taking, and their centrality to our lives. When the CEOs all work from home or take time off, it doesn't really have any impact on you and me. But all of these regular and often underpaid workers are tremendously important.

So it's a great time to make the point about why we need to support and pay well and sustain our public services—why for instance we shouldn't privatize the post office as corporate interests want to do, or allow them to contract out to the lowest bidder things like transit and sanitation. But, it's also a moment when workers can realize the leverage that they have, because a company like Amazon has been forced to admit that as high-tech as it is, all of its work depends on human labor. You've seen protests and walkouts, and Amazon was forced to give a \$2.00-an-hour raise during this period. Amazon has also retaliated; they see that workers are getting a sense of their power, and they want to try to suppress that. They've fired several workers, both tech and warehouse workers. But the crisis shows that there are all of these choke points where labor is essential to producing profits and to keeping the public going. It shows why workers have the power to organize. I think that's part of why we're seeing this real ferment, both in union workplaces, where rank and filers are getting organized and making demands without necessarily waiting for their union leaders to take the lead, and among nonunion workers too. And it's a great time for unions to make connections with nonunion workers and organize them.

And for me, just as significant, is workers making demands on the company to meet employee needs and serve the people of this country in this epidemic emergency

Yes, one more thing that's been inspiring me is to see workers taking this moment to think bigger about

what kinds of changes could be made to their work in the public interest. General Electric workers held pickets around the country to demand that their plants, where usually they make jet engines, be converted to make ventilators. And in Oshawa, Canada, there's a GM plant that's in the process of being closed down. A group of auto workers there has been saying for a year, we should convert our plant to green vehicle production. When the crisis came along they said, well, let's also use it to make masks and medical equipment that's immediately needed. And GM agreed to do it. I believe that plant is now making 1 million masks a month.

In a moment of crisis, employers and privatizers will seize on it and try to use it as a chance to accelerate their agenda, but it's also a chance for workers to say, when things come to a halt, let's take the opportunity to come up with our agenda. Let's reopen on our terms, and take this as a moment to pivot towards the needs of workers and the needs of the community, and reimagine how our jobs could be when

we come back to them.

Al Bradbury, really good talking to you. You're an essential worker, from my point of view.

Thanks, Bill.

13 May 2020

Here's Al Bradbury describing Labor Notes to KBOO radio listeners:

Labor Notes has always existed to create a forum for rank-and-file union members as well as non-union workers to connect with one another, to learn from one another, and as you said, to tell their stories, which often go untold. We've published a monthly magazine for more than 40 years, which often carries stories written by workers describing how we organized this strike, how we won this demand,

how we're fighting this issue in our workplace, written for other workers to read and learn from.

We also organize conferences. We do a big international conference every two years (although we had to postpone it this year due to the pandemic), and we organize local events: Troublemakers Schools, Secrets of a Successful Organizer trainings. Portland has hosted many of these events where local union and nonunion workplace activists learn from one another and develop strategies to build a more militant, fighting, and winning labor movement.

During the pandemic, we've been doing tons of organizing to support people who are fighting to make their jobs safer, in some cases to shut their workplaces down for safety or to win the rights and protections they need. We've been doing webinars and conference calls and publishing four times as many articles as usual, because there's so much going on, so much workplace activity.

Source [Solidarity](#).

The COVID-19 Crisis and the End of the “Low-skilled” Worker

13 May 2020, by **Mark Bergfeld, Sara R. Farris**

At first sight, this might not seem that radical. But it is. After all, the distinction between low-skilled and high-skilled jobs has allowed capital to legitimize wage inequalities, to stigmatize and devalue social reproduction, and to **mobilize international migratory movements** from poor countries to richer ones. Thus, the current crisis, and the dissolution of the traditional division (and hierarchy) of labor it has (momentarily) brought about, are forcing us to interrogate the underpinnings of so-called low-skilled work, to see clearer than ever the racialized and gendered nature of much so-called “unskilled” labor, and to put onto center stage the role of

‘life-making activities’ in the class struggles to come.

The Labor Market Isn't Working.

To understand the current paradigmatic shift, it is necessary to acknowledge how the figure of the “low-skilled worker” has been socially constructed. The OECD **defines** low-skilled workers on the basis of their educational attainment rather than in relation to the job they perform. Organizations such as the OECD, the European Union's Eurostat, or the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in Britain, use these definitions to calculate the so-called “**skills mismatches**,” which they consider as

market inefficiencies. For an individual worker, these inefficiencies mean that they work in a job below their skills-level and thus receive lower wages. For capital, these types of skills-mismatches can result in labor shortages (if skilled workers refuse to accept lower-skilled jobs), which can place pressure on labor costs and increase workers' bargaining power. According to the **OECD**, 80 million workers in Europe are mismatched by qualifications—a sign that our labor markets are completely dysfunctional.

The British ONS **calculates** workers' skills-levels in terms of how long it takes someone to acquire the

necessary skills to perform a certain job. This explicitly creates a hierarchy of skills, which inflates Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) skills and directly devalues non-STEM, or other invisible, heterogenous, and non-quantifiable skills such as interpersonal and relational skills, as well as competences acquired through work experience. This situation also helps explain why those economic sectors that employ mostly female workers—who tend to have non-STEM skills in higher percentages as compared to men—remain undervalued and underpaid compared to traditional male occupations, even if the degree of qualification is comparable.

“Right in front of our eyes, the COVID-19 crisis is dissolving the foundations upon which the traditional division of labor between intellectual and manual labor was based.”

Marxists have long regarded the construction of “skills” as driving the division between manual and non-manual workers, and thus, as the root cause of social inequalities and workers’ alienation. In *Capital Volume I* Marx argued that capitalism’s tendency towards mechanization would lead to the increasing deskilling of workers, an idea later embraced by Henry Braverman in the 1970s in his pioneering work on monopoly capitalism. For Braverman, technological advancement in capitalist societies created the conditions in which “the more science is incorporated into the labor process, the less the worker understands of the process; the more sophisticated an intellectual product the machine becomes, the less control and comprehension of the machine the worker has” (295).

Braverman was referring to a Fordist world in which the majority of workers in the Global North were employed in

manufacturing and industrial production. With the growing relocation of many factories to the Global South and the expansion of tertiary economies (see Figure 4) in the Global North from the late 1970s onward, some of his hypotheses required correction as tumultuous economic development have led to the re-organization of global labor.

Instead of a linear process of “deskilling” of the workforce through constant automation, what we have witnessed since the 1970s instead is a rather heterogenous process of patch-worked mechanization within the same sector, and an increasing polarization and segmentation of skills, occupations, and economic branches between high-skill and low-skill. What is interesting here is that it is particularly the sectors with low levels of mechanization that have resorted to a workforce defined as “low-skilled”—unlike the situation predicted by Braverman. As we will discuss in more length shortly, the lack of mechanization in these sectors has been even used as a justification to either prevent workers’ upskilling, or to treat such low-automated sectors as too labor intensive and too low in productivity to be entitled high wages.

Furthermore, such a situation of polarization and segmentation of skills, occupations, and sectors has engendered a growing racialized and gendered dynamic. A large portion of those employed in the bottom sectors of the segmented labor market and paid low wages have been migrants, ethnic minority workers and/or female workers.

On the one hand, the labor markets of the Global North in the last forty or so years have undergone what has been commonly described as a process of feminization. Such a process under the aegis of neoliberalism has not only implied that women have entered the labor market *en masse*, but also—as Guy Standing showed in the late 1990s—that the low wages and bad working conditions that have been historically reserved for feminized subjects have now been extended to an ever larger proportion of the working class through various forms of precarious and low-pay contracts.

On the other hand, many low-pay and precarious jobs have been occupied by migrant and ethnic minority laborers. From the 1973 Oil Crisis onward, we have witnessed what Alessandro De Giorgi calls the simultaneous process of de- and re-bordering richer nations. This means that while the so-called stoppage policies of the mid 1970s in Northern Europe and the USA were meant to send non-nationals the message that they were no longer welcome—at least rhetorically—those same borders were selectively left open to allow enough migrants to meet the growing demand for cheap labor.

As a result, an increasing number of occupations in the lower echelons of the labor market have been increasingly reserved for racialized and disposable populations, as so-called native born workers are no longer willing to engage in the famous DDD (Dirty, Dangerous and Demanding) and CCC (Caring, Cooking and Cleaning) jobs that tend to pay abysmally low wages. The processes of de-bordering and re-bordering that have been put in place by the richer countries in the last forty years were thus meant for nothing but to control, select, and govern labor mobility. Whether the European Union’s “freedom of movement,” the points-based immigration systems in countries like Australia or Canada (and soon UK), or the *de facto* toleration of nearly 12 million undocumented migrants in the USA, these policies lock migrants into a subordinate position, render them without political rights, and make them instantly disposable or deportable. This type of flexible and instrumental process of de- and re-bordering parallels the increased flexibilization of the labor market, which capital deems necessary to accumulate profits in times of sluggish growth and low profitability.

“Particularly the sectors with low levels of mechanization have resorted to a workforce defined as “low-skilled”—unlike the

situation predicted
by Braverman."

Mechanization, Skills Hierarchies, and Life-making Jobs.

Some of the jobs at the bottom of the segmented racialized and feminized labor markets we described above include those in the agricultural and care sectors. Jobs in these sectors are among the lowest paid and lowest regarded in our societies. And yet—following on Tithi Bhattacharya's definition—they should be better described as "life-making jobs, or activities," for without them, the reproduction of life, simply stated, is not possible. It is not surprising then, that in the midst of a pandemic, these jobs are now being categorized as "key," or "essential," thereby turning the skills hierarchy on its head and ultimately making apparent the much more relevant hierarchy between those activities that are truly life-making, and those that instead exist solely to enable profit-making.

International institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, and IMF argue that workers in agriculture, care work and other "life-making"-sectors cannot be granted higher wages because productivity gains are difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, "bullshit jobs"—to borrow David Graeber's apt definition—such as project, training and sales managers, private equity CEOs, lobbyists, telemarketers, and actuaries lie on the other end of the polarization and have seen salary increases beyond belief, contributing to rising income inequality. And this is not because they are jobs that require high skills, but only because capitalists deem them useful to help achieve the supreme goal of profit-making.

The on-going crisis thus has made at least crystal clear that humanity will probably do just fine without the bullshit jobs. But it is also making increasingly clear that the reason why life-making workers such as nurses, carers, agricultural workers and so forth receive low wages is not because they are low-skilled. Instead it is because our capitalist-driven economies find that profits are higher when the majority of life-making

professions are devalued to second-rate ranking and remain reliant upon feminized, racialized and other categories of "more disposable" workers, as these workers have less bargaining power and are thus forced to accept low-wages. Furthermore, capitalists understand all too well that some life-making sectors serve profit-making better if they remain, at least in part, non-mechanized. In this latter respect, we should reassess Braverman and, partly Marx's, prediction that the capitalists' growing investment in mechanization will bring about the deskilling of workers.

Certain sectors of agriculture, for example, has maintained very low levels of mechanization not to upskill but rather to deskill workers. While various forms of agricultural mechanization have focused mostly on land cultivation technology or are employed in monoculture crops, in Europe in particular, some sectors have remained in large part reliant upon migrant day laborers whose hands and arms are still the only reliable "tools" to pick fruit and vegetables, as this video shows. These agricultural workers are a prime example of skills mismatch, as they often hold degrees or vocational training from their home countries, which are not recognized in the European Union. The availability of migrant workers is the main reason why these jobs in the richer parts of Europe have remained largely unmechanized. Employing workers from poorer countries is in fact cheaper than buying costly machinery, insofar as initial investment is high and needs to be managed and maintained by highly skilled engineers and technical staff.

Migrants working in these agricultural sectors are often undocumented or else recruited as seasonal workers with visas allowing them to remain within a country only during harvest. It is precisely this situation of illegality and/or extreme precariousness of this workforce that allows bosses to depress wages and keep laborers politically disenfranchised and in a constant state of fear. Moreover, employers cash in considerably by providing migrant workers with food and lodging, and thus paying them abysmally low wages (even though the

housing they provide are mostly made of barracks below ILO standards). Such shoddy practices targeting migrants even extend to nurses who are keeping the British NHS alive. Here, migrant nurses have had to pay an immigration pay surcharge of £400 to obtain a visa. As discussed above, the combination of the skills hierarchy and migration regimes has allowed agribusiness to save on labor costs and rake in massive profits. Life-making activities such as agriculture thus, are belittled and remain unrecognized in times of relative capitalist stability. Yet, it is in times of crisis such as the one we are living that their essential role is revealed for what it is.

Another life-making activity which has moved center stage in recent weeks is care work. Whether healthcare, elderly care, or childcare, care work is a sector that is nearly impossible to automate. Attempts at automating some parts of care using 'nursebots' in care homes, for instance, have mostly failed. Care workers cannot be replaced by machines precisely because care tasks require interpersonal and relational skills. Thus, one of capital's strategies to reduce the labor costs in the care sector has been that of recruiting (again) migrant workers from various parts of the Global South or comparatively poorer areas. And like the agricultural sector, the care sector too is one in which most job profiles—from nurses, to elderly carers, to day-care teachers—are considered low-skill, even though many of the (predominantly female) migrant workers in the sector tend to have high degrees. This results in workers being under-paid and employers being able to save on labor costs.

In recent years, employers have opted for different strategies to devalue and under-pay care work. In particular, they have attempted to standardize and segment the care work process, which is facilitated by the growing corporatization of large sections of childcare and elderly care in many EU countries. This becomes very clear in Ken Loach's latest film, "Sorry we missed you," in which the care worker is subject to the same forms of management and control of the labor process as her husband who works as

a delivery driver. While a delivery route had to be completed in a set amount of time, the care worker depicted in the movie also had ten minutes to feed her client and ten minutes to shower them before rushing to the next client. This has been increasingly made possible by the fact that for-profit companies are investing in care, taking advantage both of the growing demand for elderly care brought about by the aging of the population and by the state's subsidy of private care services.

All in all, the reason why agricultural work and care are mostly (and increasingly) low pay is not because of their skills requirements, but exclusively because these are life-making sectors that capitalists deem too low in productivity and too labor intensive. As **Social Reproduction Theory** well explains, capitalist production needs social reproduction (or what we are here calling life-making) in order to thrive, but capitalists want to pay as little as possible for it, if at all. That is why many life-making workers such as waste collectors, healthcare or utilities workers are either incorporated into state services (which provide increasingly less jobs security and pay given the dominance of New Public Management), or else employed through private organizations which compete with each other by reducing labor costs.

The case of elderly care is paradigmatic as stories such as **Southern Cross** or, more recently, **Four Seasons** increasingly show. We should thus be wary of the skills-lexicon we have inherited according to which many life-making jobs are low-skill. On the contrary, we should challenge the skills paradigm and hierarchies that continue to determine huge social inequalities, fight for the recognition of the equal dignity and importance of jobs and professions (particularly those capitalism disregards and renders undesirable), but above all, fight for their reorganization and higher remuneration.

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The Trap of the Essential/Non-essential Worker Binary.

As we discussed above, the neoliberal restructuring of the labor market over the past forty years has degraded most life-making work through processes of skills and wage segmentation rather than linear deskilling. The distinction between low and high skills has been presented as one based on educational levels, with a narrow understanding of education as one that does not include vocational training or other interpersonal skills. At a fundamental level, it is based on the distinction between manual and intellectual labor. Consequently, the skills hierarchy has served to present wages as meritocratic rewards for those who achieve high levels of tertiary education, in particular in STEM subjects. On the other hand, university education in the social sciences or humanities has been refitted to teach transferable skills with the goal of creating employable graduates for whom the old trade union slogan of "lifelong learning" has become the nightmare of perpetual self-optimization through skills acquisition.

There was an understandable reason why the trade union movement of the 20th century in Europe and North America demanded **life-long learning** and upskilling for the workforce. This was to create a sector-wide internal labor market, which would strengthen the bargaining position of the union and the workers who had worked within the same company or sector for

a long time. Eventually upskilling would also lead to productivity gains, which would translate into higher wages and improved terms and conditions for workers. The trade union movement was successful in establishing this for a small section of mostly highly trained male workers in industry and manufacturing. With the breakdown of the post-WWII consensus, the onset of neoliberal economic and labor policies, and a shift towards a service-based employment, this model of economic and social integration through lifelong learning and upskilling of the workforce vanished.

Yet, the mostly migrant and female workers who are employed in life-making sectors, and have been categorized as "essential" during the COVID-19 crisis, were never part of this economic set-up of Keynesian capitalism. Then and now, if they receive any training at all, it is nothing more than a glorified onboarding, or company-run training scheme, to enable them to do their job. Most of these training schemes are non-certified, meaning that workers who have completed hours of training do not have these recognized when they move to other companies within or outside the sector. The European Union's **Joint Employment Report 2020** evidences that only four percent of low-skilled workers are currently enrolled in any educational program for adults across the EU. This is one of the ways capital is empowered over labor, as workers are less mobile and less confident to try to switch jobs and thus achieve higher wages.

The current crisis has thus revealed the contradictory nature of so-called low-skilled and life-making work. Capitalism continuously seeks to devalue this type of work. However, as an economic and social system, capitalism depends on life-making both as a source of profit (as in the case of agribusiness) and as a source of nourishment and health for its workers (as in the case of food production/distribution and in that of care work), as the current crisis has made crystal clear. In Britain, big business champion, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, repeatedly thanked cleaners and carers for their service and now calls them "key workers." In

Norway, the **Crown Prince sat down** for a Zoom conference with a group of cleaners, acknowledging their “critical function” in society. In Germany, the government has lifted the ban on seasonal migrants and has been flying in thousands of agricultural workers from Romania and Bulgaria. The **human cost of this** has been very high as one of these workers has died of COVID-19. But for the first time, there has actually been a debate on how this work is organized, how necessary it is to the German economy and livelihood, and how reliant it is upon migrants.

The sudden glorification of life-making, low-pay, and (seemingly) low-skilled jobs has led to their public visibility and the beginning of a political discussion about the fairness of these workers’ wages. Furthermore, such a situation is putting the ONS skills classification, which deems many essential workers’ skills as “elementary,” onto the backburner. It is a definition that belittles these skills as “simple” and thus provides grounds for their low wages. These are important developments, whose potential for the class struggle to come we will discuss in the following section. However, we should be very wary of the traps hidden behind the sudden appreciation of life-making jobs as “essential.”

To begin with, the now common distinction between “essential” and “non-essential” jobs risks reinforcing capitalist prejudice and tactics rather than challenging them. Jobs deemed as “non-essential” are often those that belong to the art, creative, and cultural industries, which have experienced severe cuts over many years, as they are deemed non-profitable. Jobs that are based in sectors that are experiencing a lowering, or lack of demand in the present or foreseeable future (e.g., restaurants, hotels and hospitality industry, airports and air-companies, college lecturers etc.), have also been labelled as “non-essential.” This is leading to widespread redundancies or “short-time work” contracts.

Furthermore, **reports** begin to suggest that professionals are facing increased workloads because of the move to home-work online. As the **EY’s latest**

study suggests, the current pandemic is being used to automate numerous industries while new information systems technologies and internal HR systems have increased **workplace surveillance**. Swathes of white-collar professionals are now being digitally monitored in the same way as a Deliveroo driver. Some groups of so-called white-collars are thus now experiencing the precariousness, insecure pay, and feeling of worthlessness that so many “essential workers” have experienced on a day-to-day basis for a long time. The binary “essential/non-essential” can thus be a dangerous terrain for workers’ rights as it can provide the “moral” justification for new skills-hierarchies and mass unemployment as some kind of deserved outcome.

The public praise for life-making jobs as “essential” so far has not been followed by a commitment to improve their wage situation and working conditions. In the UK, migrant nurses, who already have a low salary and are now commended as key workers, have to pay **an immigration pay surcharge** of £400 to obtain a visa. **ILO** and **Eurofund** research found that the COVID-19 crisis in Europe is affecting **female health-workers** disproportionately, as they are working longer hours and have to care for children and older people at home. And the same could be said for workers in general, and female workers in particular, in other now “key sectors,” who cannot move to home-working but still face the brunt of a demanding, low-pay job and possibly a family to look after at home. Thus, while increased recognition of these life-making jobs has been a feature of this unfolding crisis, an improvement of essential workers’ wages and working conditions has not followed, nor is under discussion at governmental level.

“The public praise for life-making jobs as “essential” so far has not been followed by a commitment to improve their wage situation and working

conditions.”

The Class Struggle To Come.

It is hard to predict the future and ultimately to know whether these jobs will maintain the status they have so far acquired once the pandemic has ended, and if applause will be followed by actual wage increase. But if the crisis created by the pandemic has made one thing clear it is that many life-making workers might no longer accept hazardous conditions for the same low-pay. In California, **care workers** at a hard-hit nursing home stayed away from their job. In the cleaning sector, employers have faced staff shortages and unusually high absentee rates. Workers have started to fear the virus more than their employers. Most of these protests have been about workplace safety and lack of PPE. Staten Island Amazon warehouse worker Chris Smalls organized a walk-out at his workplace over the lack of sufficient personal protective equipment. Not only did Amazon workers **win** a paid leave policy on March 23, but they also obtained the PPE they were demanding.

In recent weeks, manufacturing, logistics and supermarket workers **have all engaged in spontaneous strike actions over health and safety issues at their workplaces**. The strikes have raised eyebrows in many corners of the mainstream press with New York Magazine even featuring a story titled, “The Coronavirus **is radicalizing** workers.” Many of these spontaneous strikes are indeed turning into stable union organization; the union, Unite, in the UK, for instance, **reports** that more than 16,000 workers joined the union since the beginning of the lockdown.

Workers in life-making sectors in particular have also begun to claim the long overdue wage increases they deserve. Some companies have tried to preempt workers’ demands for higher wages by paying them “bonuses,” as in the case of the **French supermarket chain, Auchan**. Similarly, Amazon is paying new recruits \$2 an hour more, while the German government has pursued another route by passing a **new working time law**, which will be in

place until the end of July and states that workers in “essential services” work up to twelve hours to stem the labor shortage and increased demand for these services.

All of this can open up new fault lines at a time when the link between productivity and wages is clearly broken down across the whole of our economies. For this reason, focusing our demands on higher wages and

improved conditions for “life-making” workers might prove strategically key for the labor movement, and the left globally at this conjuncture. That is the case not only because life-making workers are on the frontline in a time of pandemic, but above all because their struggles shed light in the clearest possible way on the unsustainability and life-threatening nature of capitalism. Life-making sectors could thus become the new

hubs of organized labor.

As life-making laborers stand in an insoluble contradiction with profit-making rationality, their work can speak of an alternative way of conceiving the economy and wealth, one that puts human lives and public health first.

10 May 2020

Source *Spectre Journal*.

When Bootlicking Overrides Fighting Epidemic

12 May 2020, by **Au Loong-Yu**

What had Xi Jinping Done in Early January?

As of early April 2020, the information concerning the first confirmed case of a Covid-19 patient was on 1st December, 2019. [66] Starting from middle December, “there is evidence that human-to-human transmission has occurred among close contacts since the middle of December 2019.” [67] Local hospitals sent their samples to Vision Medical in Guangzhou for testing and on 27th December the genome sequencing, “results showed an alarming similarity to the deadly Sars coronavirus”, as reported by the Caixin.com. [68] Vision Medical immediately reported their findings to the Hubei Provincial Health Commission. Yet between 1st and 3rd January, 2020, they were told by both the Hubei Provincial and the National Health Commission that they must destroy their samples, stop doing more tests thereafter, and not report their findings to the public.

Meanwhile on 30th December unknown whistle blowers posted online two documents from the Wuhan Health Commission mentioning

pneumonia of an unknown cause, forcing the Wuhan Health Commission to, for the first time, announced that there were 27 cases of “viral pneumonia” but down-tone the virus by saying that there was no human-to-human transmission. Both claims were lies.

On a national level something even bigger was going on. On 10th January the Spring Festival travel rush would start. If this was allowed to go ahead it would definitely spread the virus all through the country at lightning speed. The clock was ticking.

Instead of the National Health Commission, it was the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that sounded an internal grade two alert for an emergency on 6th January, and the top Party leaders were notified of the newly discovered virus. The next day the Standing Committee of the Politburo convened and discussed about the novel coronavirus as a side event. A month later, in the face of mounting discontent with the authorities, Xi Jinping revealed his internal report to show that he had been leading the Party to fight against the virus all along. The earliest entry of the report relating to the virus was about his remark at the 7th Politburo

meeting, where it was reported that he “made requests for the prevention and control work of the coronavirus outbreak”. He did not say what kind of “requests” they were. If the “request” was something substantial and useful he would not have forgotten to mention what it actually meant. The fact that he did not was probably because it was not anything substantial. His action, or more correctly speaking, inaction, also seemed to point to this scenario, because there was no entry of anything done by him in the period between the 7th and 20th in the published report, the moment when the virus spread like fire. He did nothing in these crucial two weeks, rather he just watched as the travel rush and the Wuhan banquet (see below) went ahead as scheduled. He finally issued a public instruction on the 20th that, “we must attach great importance to the epidemic and do our best to prevent it.” [69] The “instruction” on the 20th was slightly more substantial but it was already too late. By that time, tens of millions of passengers were already on their way back to their home town or home village. Shouldn’t Xi have said this on the 7th if he was fully aware at that time that the virus was able to transmit human-to-human and that hundreds were already infected? By

making his internal speech public soon after it was made, Xi wanted to show that he had been acting on the pandemic early on. In fact, the speech suggested the otherwise.

A Ming Pao report on the on the 7th Politburo meeting suggested that Xi and/or other top leaders might have said something even more catastrophic. According to the report, “the leader” there decided that while prevention of the outbreak should be made, it “should not cause panic and affect the festival atmosphere of the coming Lunar New Year.” [70] Notice here that the first message about prevention of an outbreak was balanced by a second message which practically read “don’t you dare cause panic and affect the festival atmosphere of the coming Lunar New Year!” All the mandarins below would immediately understand which message should come first. Hence, they continued to promote the festival while repressing the news about the coming epidemic.

To make sure everything looked normal the authorities of both the Wuhan municipality and Hubei province decided to go ahead with their two scheduled meetings of the People’s Congress and People’s Political Consultative Conference, during the period of the 6 - 17th January. These were followed by a great feast on the 18th January, involving 40,000 families. Thanks to these public events the virus now spread even faster. Three days later, Xi Jinping gave his “instruction” on the 20th. Only when the top leader spoke, did his subordinates begin to act, and locked down Wuhan on the 23rd. Yet 5 million Wuhan residents had already fled, joining the hundreds of millions of passengers in the travel rush.

Hidden Rules Overrides the Law

According to some experts, if only travel bans and contact reductions, “could have been conducted one week, two weeks, or three weeks earlier in China, cases could have been reduced by 66%, 86%, and 95%, respectively, and significantly reduce the number of

affected areas. [71] ”

Why did the Wuhan authorities act as they did? This leads us to a discussion of certain features of the CCP bureaucracy. One of them is that what the laws say is not as important as what one’s superiors may think. Any common Mainland Chinese, if they can speak freely, will tell you that simultaneously there were two set of rules at work, one is the law, the other is the “*qiangui*”, or “hidden rules”. [72] The latter is always more important. Guessing what your superiors think is considered an important element of the hidden rule as well. We would witness how this Chinese bureaucratic logic fully played out in this pandemic.

According to the Article 38 of the law of the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases, “the announcement of information concerning infectious diseases should be correct and without delay”. Article 65 stipulates that government departments failing to do the above will be liable for administrative penalties or criminal prosecution. Now with the information revolution it is much easier to implement the law to safeguard the wellbeing of the people. The 2003 outbreak of SARS prompted the China CDC to develop a web-based infectious disease automated alert and response system and was implemented across China in April 2008. [73] It is also called the China Information System for Disease Control and Prevention (CISDCP). Previously “local CDCs would submit report once a month up the chain to the National CDC. With the CISDCP, hospitals and clinics now immediately and directly reported through the internet.” [74] Yet on 29th December when the Wuhan hospitals reported cases of pneumonia of unknown cause to the district and municipal Health Commission, the latter, instead of telling them to make a direct report through the CISDCP, told the former “to wait for instruction from our superiors”. On 5th January, the Wuhan Health Commission revised the manual for reporting which practically robbed the hospitals of their power to make direct reports altogether and handed it to the Provincial Health Commissions. On top of this change, the Commission also required the

hospitals to report up the chain of district, municipal and provincial Health Commissions for double checks, one by one. [75] In one stroke, the Health officials nullified both the law and the CISDCP.

Since the pandemic spread around the globe, the CCP has engineered a great propaganda of self-promotion by mocking how Trump and other Western countries had badly handled the crisis. Trump’s administration did act poorly. Yet there is one difference between the US and China to say the least. While Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) could openly criticise Trump, any Chinese expert doing this would not only risk being fired but also being put in jail or simply “being disappeared”. Not only did the Party leaders stand above the laws, they stood above science and scientists as well. It is because they believe they know better than anyone, or are omniscient. However brilliant a scientist in China is, it is the bureaucrats who have the final say, including sending the scientist to jail for telling the truth. No wonder that when the Politburo founded the nine members special task force on 25th January to deal with the epidemic it did not think it was necessary to include any pandemic specialist.

Xi reminded his party quietly on the 7th January that even when it needed to do something on the coronavirus it should not affect the Festival atmosphere. Why was he so concerned about the Festival? Readers are reminded that bringing joy to the people during the Spring Festival is a state project. This is shown in the Central Television Spring Festival Gala, which has lasted for four decades and held at New Year’s Eve. Upon watching such a grand show Chinese people would be grateful to the Party, again. Anyone who is a bit familiar with the history of the Chinese Empire would know that the Emperor needed to be told again and again about how his subject lived happily and remained grateful to him, to the extent that even the Yellow River became clean of its usual sediment and turned crystal clear and that the sea turned calm. He hated bad news. His subordinates knew this too well, and after witnessing the

tragic fate of those who failed the lower level officials necessarily turned themselves into yes men, and never hesitated to glorify him at whatever social cost.

Modern Version of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein?

We must bear in mind that the 2019 pandemic had its prequel in the 2003 SARS epidemic. The main character in both dramas was the same CCP, which acted the same way in 2019 as it did in 2003. It is only the virus that has been different; the 2019 version has been more contagious and deadly.

Right now the Chinese government is making a new biosecurity legislation and elevate it to a national security issue. The bill, again, includes articles about punishing those who dare to lie about the epidemic. Perhaps nowadays commentators in the West are no longer as enthusiastic about the Party's self reform through making of new laws as they did in the past. Many felt deceived. Or perhaps there was a dosage of self delusion as well? The well known Hungarian economist, Janos Kornai, wrote an article in Financial Times last July with the title *Economists share blame for China's 'monstrous' turn*. He confessed that how he had advised top CCP officials in 1985 to introduce reform to China "by the electric shock of marketisation and private property", but eventually their endeavour only became "the modern version of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein" [76].

I think Clinton also owe us an apology for having said this in his 2000 speech:

"By joining the W.T.O., China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products; it is agreeing to import one of democracy's most cherished values: economic freedom. [77]"

The EU by then shared the same "change through trade" policy. [78] But history has proved that CCP's recognition of "economic freedom" had not resulted in any democratic

change. Market competition is the "categorical imperative" of capital, but democracy is not.

If Kornai had ever spoken to workers long enough, he might have a different view. After China's accession to the WTO, a Hong Kong NGO had published a book *Voices from Below - China's Accession to WTO and Chinese Workers* which was a collection of interviews with workers. Years have passed since then but the memory about these interviews remains fresh with me. One of them said, "the state enterprises will become private enterprises, the leaders will also become capitalists"; the other mocked those foreigners who put too much faith on the letters of the laws and the WTO's agreements, without realizing the importance of "guanxi", or "private connection" [79].

Ironically, when Western trade unions should have known better some of them still led to believe that with the official trade union ACFTU starting to promote labour laws it implied that the official union is getting more and more pro-labour, hence they began to call for a grand strategy of "engagement policy" with ACFTU. Or when Beijing began to have laws on civil associations (NGOs) certain international NGOs leaders saw these as a big step forward towards the advancement of civil society in China..

A half modern and half premodern bureaucracy

The crux of the matter is that, however, "hidden rules" in general and "guanxi" in particular always comes before the law. A bit less than three years ago when I wrote on the 19th Party Congress I talked about the pre-modern element of the CCP. [80] This pre-modern political element demands within its own ranks a kind of loyalty and obedience similar to pre-modern personal bondage. The upside of this level of loyalty is that it makes the top leader feel more reassured of his power, the down-side is that it is also highly divisive because it necessarily creates a mechanism of

fierce competition for trust from the top leaders among subordinating bureaucracy, hence creating multiple cliques and in-fighting. This often degenerates into a crazy race to the bottom, setting in motion what I call survival of the most unscrupulous. Secondly, its hyper centralization of power compels the lower level bureaucrats, when they implement the top leader's policies, to overdo things so as to both save their skins and reap their own benefits, without regards for the consequences. We have seen this first in the Hong Kong case and again in the current pandemic.

This return of Imperial China's political tradition tempted Fei-Ling Wang to argue in his book *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power* that today's China "is a reincarnated Qin-Han polity" which aims at global expansion and hence necessarily comes into conflict with the US. [81] "Qin" refers to the first unified dynasty founded by Qin Shihuang in BC 221. "Han" refers to the Han Dynasty which succeeded the Qin. I think the advantage of his term is that it captures the pre-modern political culture of the Beijing regime, but there is a downside as well. Let us not forget that it was also crazily committed to mobilising the people in China's industrialisation and modernisation. Its modern features standing side by side with its pre-modern features. The Party's industrialisation drive has had an unintended consequence. The Party turned China into a country which has a highly educated people, an urbanised society, a large working class and middle class - which certain political scientists regard as democratic classes. [82] No one knows this better than the CCP. It is also one of the main reasons for the Party's constant paranoia over the slightest signs of dissidents and unrest.

That the top leaders are obsessed with self-promotion was not just out of pre-modern culture. The bureaucracies enrich themselves through the modern way, the way of capitalism, not through the old Imperial way of direct appropriation of agricultural surplus. They enrich themselves much quicker than their counterparts in the world is further because they are able to

combine both the power of the coercive state and the power of capital in its hands, hence devouring an ever bigger share of social surplus at the expense of the people – ironically, with the help of the Western countries. It is aware that it has been too greedy, too noticeable an enemy of the people, therefore it has, on the one hand, spent a big chunk of public money to spy on the people, and to brain wash them about how great its leaders are on the other. It is not just out of personal vanity that Xi requires his subordinates to glorify him non-stop. It is a collective endeavour to both justify their greed and to paralyze the people's minds so that they stop

thinking for themselves. Ironically, the CCP's tendency to massively overdoing things may also lead it down the road of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The present pandemic already showed signs of unrest. After Li Wenliang died, millions of netizens mourned the doctors, and hundreds of thousands of them posted greetings to him. A Wuhan resident even dared to say this:

"I hope people understand that... what they need is a government which protects the ultimate interest of each

and every citizen. This ultimate interest is not just about property, but also about lives! If I am fortunate enough to live, I will no longer be concerned with the bullshit about the great revival of our nation! Nor about the dogs' fart of the belt and road! I won't even care about ...if Taiwan is independent or unified (with Mainland)! In this crisis I just wish I could have rice to eat and cloth to wear!.....I am above all an individual, a living person! Sorry, I can't afford to love a government and a country which just allows me to rot in a crisis moment! [83]"

2 May 2020

“Only an anti-systemic revolution, breaking with the iron laws of capitalism can open the way for a new society”

11 May 2020, by Michael Löwy

Many years ago in the ecosocialist manifest, you pointed out that countless points of resistance emerged spontaneously in the chaotic world of global capital, and claimed that most of these points of resistance are inherently ecosocialists in nature. You called for possibilities for these movements to come together and establish an “ecosocialist international”. In the past 15 years, the resistance against the chaotic world of the global capital order has increased and spread. Especially the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 were occupied with riots. Where are we today with regards to the ecosocialist international idea? Have the possibilities for this increased?

Michael Löwy There has been indeed an increase in the social-ecological resistance against global capital. Peasant, indigenous communities and women are in the forefront of this struggle, as well as the youth: millions

went on the streets, following the call of Greta Thunberg. Such an international mobilization on climate justice is without precedent. This gives us hope, but until now the fossil oligarchy is still in power and imposes its disastrous rule: business as usual. We are fastly moving towards catastrophe...

There have been some modest but interesting attempts at creating, not an “ecosocialist international” – that would be premature – but an international network of ecosocialists. The most recent attempt, which started this year, is the Global Ecosocialist Network, a very promising initiative.

The Green New Deal has been widely discussed in many countries, especially by the radical opposition from the United States, and then beyond the borders of the USA. What does Green New Deal mean to you? Is it enough to save the planet?

Michael Löwy There are different versions of the Green New Deal. The most interesting is the one sponsored in the US by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Socialists of America. The adoption of this proposal would not “save the planet” but would be a very important step forward, against the entrenched interests of the ruling capitalist elite, and towards an ecological transition. However, in order to prevent the catastrophe of global warming, one would have to take increasingly radical measures, which would completely phase out fossil energies, and begin a process of anti-capitalist transformation.

The virus was not a surprise for those working on ecological collapse. The fact that such disasters are a natural consequence of the capitalist production procedure has been drawn to ecology struggles for many years, including ecosocialists. Nevertheless, when disasters erupt, this perspective

can be forgotten, and conspiracies can reign. So it is good to go over it. What is the relationship between the virus and the logic of capitalism? What causes the virus to spread?

Michael Löwy I'm not a specialist in infection research, so I cannot say much on this, except that the conspiracy theories are another trick of the most reactionary figures of the system (Trump, Bolsonaro) to distract public opinion of the real issues. Issue number one is of course the destruction, by all neo-liberal governments, of the public health system, by closing hospitals, refusing to recruit doctors and nurses, leading to a disastrous situation when the virus arrived. Criminals such as Trump and Bolsonaro are willing to

have millions of dead in their countries, giving priority to the continuity of the capitalist economic activity, at any price.

The unsustainability of capitalism emerges more and more sharply with the destruction processes that come along. How is the construction of a new society possible with a Marxist ecological perspective?

Michael Löwy Capitalism is not only an unsustainable system: it is a *destructive* one, leading the planet, and therefore humanity, to a catastrophe without precedent in history: global warming, the rise of temperature to unbearable levels, the melting of the ices, the rise of the sea

level - with the disappearance of Amsterdam, Venice, New York or Hong-Kong - and the drying up of the rivers.

From our Marxist perspective, only an anti-systemic revolution, breaking with the iron laws of capitalism can open the way for a new society, an ecosocialist civilization, based on values of solidarity, freedom, democracy, and respect for Mother Earth. Will this be possible, before it is too late? We don't know...But as Bertolt Brecht used to say: "Those who fight may lose, but those who don't fight have lost already."

10 May 2020

This interview was initially realized for the Turkish Marxist website elyazmalar.com.

In France, facing the coronavirus: lies, incompetence and social reaction

11 May 2020, by Henri Wilno

Faced with the coronavirus, the French government, under the impulsion of President Emmanuel Macron and directly led by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, has been a combination of incompetence, lies and hesitation, while a state of health emergency has been put in place, including both measures to fight the pandemic and provisions that infringe on freedoms and the provisions of the Labour Code.

Three elements of context

Three elements of context are important to understand the situation. First of all, there is budgetary management governed by austerity, which has persisted for many years, whether the right or the "left" are in power. The cut in the health budget hit hospitals hard, with the closure or dismantling of services, staff

reductions, and a big reduction in the number of beds. For more than a year, the government has remained deaf to the demands from personnel working in EHPADs (care homes for dependent elderly people) and hospitals. However, several months ago, a banner in a demonstration of health workers warned: "You count your money, tomorrow you will count our dead". The issue of medical masks also illustrates how the government has been running things. Whereas in 2009, according to a report from the French Senate, following the H1N1 flu, the state owned 723 million FFP2 masks (the most effective) and one billion surgical masks, this stock had decreased in early 2019 to 150 million surgical masks and no FFP2 masks. Where had the masks gone? Out of date, scattered everywhere, lost.... In fact, the neo-liberals' assumption was that the state did not need a strategic stock: if a new epidemic occurred, masks would always be found cheaply in China.

Second element, the consequences of capitalist globalization on the production of drugs. For years, there have been shortages in the supply of various drugs, even very basic ones. Several reports (from the Academy of Pharmacy in 2013 and from the Senate in 2018) had warned of dependence on imports for the active ingredients used in the pharmaceutical industry. The French state, concerned above all to play the game of the market and in no way to interfere with private enterprises, watched without intervening the deterioration and closure of various production units: notably those producing the active substance of the drug doliprane, medical masks and oxygen tanks. The materials and substances necessary for the tests are practically no longer produced in France.

Third element: the nature of government under Emmanuel Macron. In the first round of the presidential

elections of 2017 he had won the support of 18 per cent of registered voters and had owed his election in the second round especially to the rejection of Marine le Pen and to the crisis of the parties that had governed before him: the Republicans (LR, right) and the Socialist Party (PS). Macron had been a senior civil servant and then an investment banker, before being appointed a minister by Hollande. His role is above all to be the authorized representative of capital to put an end to what it considers to be the French "lateness" and, to this end, to break social resistance. To do this, he has made wide use of the police against the four major social movements of his presidency: against the "softening" of the Labour Code, "the Yellow Jackets movement", the mobilizations against the reform of the SNCF (the public railway company) and against pension reform. For such a person and his entourage of technocrats and careerists (partly from the PS), health is a cost and the sick (like the unemployed and the beneficiaries of social benefits) are a dead weight on the budget: they are therefore not really prepared to handle a health crisis.

In fact, everything happened as in a play with four acts.

The first two acts of the tragedy

At first, in January and early February, the French authorities completely underestimated the problem: it concerned the Chinese, the countries of Southeast Asia, then the Italians. The Chinese eat pangolin, Italian grandparents often take care of their grandchildren.... In France, "it's not the same". The first three officially registered cases (on 24 January) were therefore not considered to herald a possible extension of the epidemic to the territory of France, especially since they were French people of Chinese origin. At the same time, officials and many doctors who were interviewed in the media downplayed the severity of the illness, compared to the flu that returns every year.

The French government was therefore

preparing little or nothing to deal with an extension of the epidemic in France. And the lies began. Minister of Health Agnès Buzyn declared on 26 January: "We have tens of millions of masks in stock in the event of an epidemic, these are things that have already been planned. If one day we had to tell one or other part of the population or person at risk to wear masks, the health authorities would distribute these masks to people who need them."

In February, the state gradually became aware of the risk of an epidemic, but the measures taken remained derisory (orders for masks that were far from covering the needs of medical staff, which were estimated at 40 million per week). Without saying so explicitly (unlike in Britain), everything happened as if the government was playing the card of herd immunity: let the epidemic spread, while preventing hospitals from being overwhelmed. Because there is a problem: the reduction in hospital beds has resulted in France having only 5,000 resuscitation beds, as against more than 25,000 in Germany. The other parameter is the concern not to take measures likely to weaken already shaky economic growth. The reassuring statements continued on the part of the government, while the shortages of masks and hydroalcoholic gels were more and more patent.

In any case, the main concerns of the French government at the time were of another order: breaking the social movement against pension reform and limiting the foreseeable failure of LREM (the Republic on the Move, the party of Emmanuel Macron) in the municipal elections. On 16 February 2020, the Minister of Health left her post to become head of the LREM list for the municipal elections in Paris. However, the government had all the means necessary for understanding the risks of the situation. [84]

On 25 February the first French death was recorded unrelated to Chinese territory, and in the following days, the number of cases detected increased. On Saturday 29 February an extraordinary Council of Ministers officially met to discuss the coronavirus; in fact, it also discussed

pension reform and ways to speed up its adoption by the Macronist majority in Parliament. The action of the government aimed to control the various local clusters of the epidemic to avoid it spreading throughout the country. Although the number of cases and deaths was increasing (and well-known personalities were being discreetly tested while the tests were unavailable, including for health personnel), on 7 March in Paris, the President declared that "there is no reason, apart from vulnerable populations, to modify our habits of going out".

Third act: " We are at war

Then, faced with the concern that was spreading among the population and the risk of saturation of hospitals due to the increase in the number of cases, on 12 March the discourse changed. On 10 March emphasis was placed on the need for "barrier gestures" (not shaking hands or kissing, etc.) and a "Scientific Council" was created to advise the President. On 12 March Emmanuel Macron announced a series of measures: the entire school system was closed, all companies could postpone the payment of social contributions and taxes, a massive mechanism of partial unemployment was put in place (wages were taken charge of by the state (up to about 80 per cent) and not by the company, teleworking was encouraged. The Ministry of Health requested the deprogramming of non-emergency surgical procedures. Gatherings of more than 100 people were prohibited. But the first round of the municipal elections was maintained on 15 March (which caused a significant degree of contamination).

On 16 March in a new intervention, Emmanuel Macron repeated several times "France is at war" and announced the beginning of the lockdown (*confinement*) of the population (limitation of movements, etc.). The stated objective was to slow the spread of the virus. The number of deaths was increasing and the hospitals were overwhelmed ... and the truncated or false information continued.

The daily number of deaths announced each evening initially included only deaths in hospitals; later, deaths in retirement homes were added, but the figures were incomplete; lastly, deaths at home were still not recorded,

Faced with shortages of masks and testing, the government repeated that this was not a problem because it was useless to test widely and that wearing a mask was also useless, even counterproductive.

In fact, while only activities essential to the life of the population were supposed to continue, the government wanted to keep cessation of work to a minimum: on 19 March the Minister of Labour spoke of “defeatism” in relation to the building sector, which had stopped work on construction sites. Big companies were trying to start up again and were prevented from doing so, totally or partially, by the refusal of their workers. Companies benefited from significant government aid.

The “war” announced by Macron coexisted with a concern not to impose anything on companies, none of which were requisitioned to produce what would be necessary to fight the pandemic. If some of them reconverted their production, it was on their own initiative or on the basis of commercial contracts with the state. The government’s incompetence was demonstrated by the way it handled orders of masks from China and an order of 10,000 respirators from French manufacturers: around 8,500 of them turned out to be unsuitable for the care of patients suffering from coronavirus.

Those who suffered from the “war” were above all the popular classes. Precarious or self-employed workers were concerned neither by partial unemployment nor by aid to companies. Hospital and retirement home workers, rubbish collectors, supermarket workers, delivery workers, etc., are often poorly paid. Macron and his ministers pay homage

to them hypocritically for their dedication without granting them any wage increases, only an exceptional bonus, while these workers are doubly exposed to the coronavirus: during their work and during the necessary transport time to get there. Among them, there is a large proportion of women. According to a document of 2 April from the Scientific Council, among workers, 35 per cent worked outside the home, 60 per cent declared that they were not working and 5 per cent were doing telework. Compared to this, 10 per cent of executives were working outside the home, 24 per cent were not working, and 66 per cent were doing telework. Finally, people occupying apartments that are too small and residents of working-class neighbourhoods who are more subject to police checks (and therefore at risk of being stopped and fined for breaching lockdown) than those who live in more bourgeois neighbourhoods. We should add to those who are particularly victims of lockdown the homeless, the imprisoned, patients in psychiatric hospitals, asylum seekers, etc.

On 22 March Parliament, sitting with very limited participation and debating at an accelerated pace, adopted a law establishing a state of health emergency, authorizing the government to govern by ordinances. Its field of application is very wide and includes the possibility, in principle for a limited period, of restriction of freedoms and suspension of the rules of the Labour Code (working hours could, for example, be temporarily fixed at 60 hours per week). Beyond the fight against the epidemic, what we have here is actually a limitation of the freedom of action of trade unions and social movements (as seen on 1 May) and the preparation of the conditions for the hoped-for recovery of the economy.

Fourth act: towards lifting

lockdown?

On 13 April Macron announced that lifting lockdown would begin on 11 May and gave the government the task of developing a plan to make it happen.

From there, disorder has characterized the communication of the government and the President. Nothing is clear. Easing restrictions will be done differently according to the regions. Conflicting indications are given about the reopening of the school system. Mayors do not want the government to take responsibility away from them. As for urban transport, its use will probably be risky. All economic activities are expected to restart on 11 May, with the exception of cafes, restaurants and cinemas.

On tests and masks, the government has now changed its doctrine: it will be necessary to test and for people to wear masks (compulsorily in public transport). But there are not enough tests, despite reassuring statements. As for masks, the French government has invented a new category: the “general public” cloth mask, washable and of uncertain effectiveness.

Basically, it is a question, for the government and the employers, of restarting the economy without changing the logic that amplified the disaster. It is far too early to write in France (and elsewhere) the obituary of neoliberalism, as a number of sometimes interesting texts and manifestos tend to do, but which all too often pass from a correct “it cannot last” to an illusory “it will not last”. As if neoliberalism and capitalism could collapse by themselves. The future will be played out in the field of social confrontation. In any case, those who rule are preparing to defend their order. Moreover, the police and the gendarmerie recently placed orders for drones and tear gas....

5 May 2020

Reimagining the Frontline from Heaven's Edge

10 May 2020, by **Yasmin Gunaratnam**

What's a typical day like for you, I ask. It begins, she tells me, at 4am when Vani cooks for her husband and three children. By 6.30 she has the kids ready and sends them off to school. She will do the laundry and housework, leaving for work at around 7.30. If there's time, she can change her clothes and have a drink of water. The agreed time to finish her day as a domestic worker is 5pm. But this is rare. It can be 6 or later before she's allowed to go home where more cooking and housework are waiting.

The journey from the plantation to domestic work is becoming more common in Sri Lanka. Informal workers account for 70 percent of the island's workforce. [85] They work without employment protection or paid leave. Menaha Kandasamy, founder of the DWU and the first woman General Secretary of the plantation Red Flag Union, describes plantations as social wombs for domestic workers. Kandasamy estimates that around 75% of domestic workers are from plantations.

Women-led trade unions, mobilizing across the formal and informal sectors, are proving to be fierce advocates during the pandemic. Their holistic campaigns have refused to cordon off the on-going challenges of diet, housing, housework and domestic violence from struggles for just wages and adequate pandemic protections. The unions stand out in a male dominated movement, rife with longstanding allegations that plantation unions have been prioritizing party politics and clandestine deals with employers over workers' rights. [86]

The DWU was the first union to do relief work, delivering rice, flour, sugar and spices to members during

the pandemic curfew, which began on 20 March.

"Our number one priority is our livelihood. Health is number two," Vani says. Why this way around? Because for the poor there are two pandemics. Vani believes that many domestic workers will die, not because of the coronavirus, but from the slow violence of food insecurity and starvation. Already they are skipping meals so there is more food to go around, and several are sick with other health conditions like asthma. A consuming dread is whether they will still have jobs when the curfew is lifted.

Malnutrition was identified by a 2017 World Bank study as a pervasive problem for women and children on plantations, findings include relatively high rates of conditions such as stunted growth and anaemia. [87] With schools now closed and children at home during the day, women are struggling more than ever to work and maintain the health of their households.

Life Support

The two unions' different yet interconnected struggles animate discussions in social reproduction theory. Social reproduction is the work that is needed to create and sustain life. I think of it as a distributed machinery of life support. Day-to-day struggles around family relationships, care and sexual violence are seen as crucial to understanding capitalist accumulation as are traditional Marxist concepts like the economy, labour and exploitation. "The most important insight of social reproduction theory is that capitalism is a unitary system that can successfully, if unevenly, integrate the

sphere of reproduction and the sphere of production," Tithi Bhattacharya has explained. "Changes in one sphere thus create ripples in another. Low wages and neoliberal cost-cutting at work can produce foreclosures and domestic violence at home." [88]

COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions on legal, care and advocacy services have had an impact on social reproduction on local and global scales. A report by the United Nations Populations Fund, published on 27th April, predicts that the pandemic will have catastrophic effects on efforts to counter gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation, child marriage and domestic violence. [89] If lockdowns continue for 6 months, we can expect to see 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence.

From its work in the heart of domestic life, the Domestic Workers Union has felt the cascading impacts of pandemic restrictions on social reproduction across class divides. In Sri Lanka, the richest 20 per cent of the population holds more than half the total household income of the country, with the poorest 20 per cent getting 5 per cent. [90] Elite households of inherited wealth and business owners, such as those in the capital city Colombo, are isolating with their domestic workers. Middle class families, with relatively more insecure portfolio careers, have been hit harder. With fewer reserves, they are cutting-costs by dismissing domestic staff. The union has been campaigning for those who can afford it to continue to pay at least 50% of their domestic worker's monthly salary and to take them back once pandemic measures ease. The International Labour Organization forecasts that the sharp decrease in working hours globally due to the

pandemic will mean 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy “stand in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed.” [91]

Applying social reproduction theory across global chains of production provokes questions about how we might reimagine social justice alliances and responsibilities in the pandemic. As we have been seeing, not everyone is in lockdown. “Frontline” workers, from care professionals to those in supermarkets, factories and transport have had to continue working. Faced with their increased vulnerability to COVID-19 infection, we have had to re-examine the distribution of occupational esteem, value and risk. In Sri Lanka, plantations, rice farming and fishing were among the trades exempted from curfew restrictions, bringing them into the frontline.

I have reservations about how the military vocabulary of the “frontline” has become naturalised in the pandemic, how it blurs willingness, duty, coercion, vulnerability and protection. If, as Arundhati Roy imagines, the pandemic is a portal, the frontline is a timepiece. [92] The rate and extent of its casualties tell us how care services and workers’ lives have been invested in and are valued. It stands between us and premature death. It gives time. But what if we reimagine the frontline? What if we allow it to unfurl in time and space, to include the histories and contemporary conditions of those lives that are a part of the everyday materials that sustain us?

Let’s begin this reimagining with what is in your cup. It could be coffee or cocoa. Because it is my favourite, and because after water, it is the world’s most popular drink, my case example is tea. [93]

Colonial dregs

Tea is one of several plantation crops grown in Sri Lanka. Along with rubber and coconut, it is a leading export. [94] Large-scale plantation agriculture was a crucial foundation of the British colonization of the island, beginning with coffee in the 1820s and diversifying to include tea, rubber

and coconut estates.

Writing in a 1984 special issue of *Race and Class* on Sri Lanka, Rachel Kurian, Jenny Bourne and Hazel Waters pointed out that plantation regimes are violently hierarchical, extractive and totalising. Under the British, the authors observed, “Every aspect of the working and domestic life of the plantation worker was subsumed to the need for profit.” By the end of the nineteenth century, the machinery of late Victorian imperialism had produced what Mike Davis describes as “a huge global class of immiserated semi-peasants and farm laborers lacking existential security of subsistence.” [95]

Plantations were also a crucial laboratory for modern race-making — inventing and imposing what Lisa Tilley sees as “a racially stratified order, with granular evidence on the ‘planting’ of whiteness in the top layer of the labor regime.” [96] The Middle Passage and the plantocracies, defining elements of transatlantic slavery, performed an ungendering (Hortense Spillers), or a trans or regendering (Stefano Harney and Fred Moten) of enslaved peoples — reducing them, irrespective of gender, to exploitable, dehumanized “flesh.” [97] And feminist philosopher Donna Haraway has coined the neologism “plantationocene” to characterize the era of plantation regimes as enclosures built on forced multi-species labour. For Haraway, “the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation.” [98]

Ecological degradation continues in soil depletion and misuse of fertilisers and economic exploitation still runs through plantation life in Sri Lanka. [99] The work is inescapably physical, most often done by poor women from the “plantation” or “estate” Tamil communities. They are the descendants of an indentured labour force originally uprooted, with few legal rights, from Tamil Nadu in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. They are still regarded as outsiders, differentiated from “indigenous” Tamils who live in the north and east of the island. Many who work on plantations, do not own the land and houses their families

have been in for generations, with poverty and debt bondage weighing heavily on estate communities. [100] Plantation Tamil workers have a long, if ambivalent history of trade union struggles for better pay, working conditions and race equality.

Demonstrations by plantation workers as recently as January 2019 called for a doubling of the minimum wage — raising it to 1000 rupees a day (USD 5.61). [101] The demand was not met. Buying ethically does not always lift us out of these circuits of exploitation. A 2019 investigation by the Thomson Reuters Foundation found the take-home wages in some tea estates certified by Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade came to as little as 26 rupees a day (USD 0.34) after the deduction of debt repayments, salary advances and other fees was made. [102]

There are differences in pay, rights and conditions between state-owned and privately run estates, but control over the socially reproductive labour of women reaches across the sectors. Successive “Family Background Reports” (FBR) are one example. The reports, vigorously opposed by feminist activists, were introduced in 2013, supposedly to protect women. The FBR required endorsement by an estate superintendent before women were allowed to work abroad. For the past twenty years plantations have faced labour shortages as more women look for work elsewhere. [103] The FBRs tried to keep them within the plantation economy, “because if labor can escape, it will escape the plantation” (Haraway).

The plantation labor force in Sri Lanka has always been locked-down. With COVID-19 there is the risk of intensifying vulnerability that demands a new activism centered on dismantling gender, class and racialized inequalities within struggles for collective wellbeing.

Plantation Unions

The women-led Red Flag Union, one of the few plantation unions publicly raising concerns about the impact of the coronavirus, says that pandemic public health measures are a paradox

on estates, for they promise the arrival of something alien to the regime: care. Red Flag have been campaigning for toilet breaks and a designated space for women to wash their hands with soap and eat their lunch since 2010. Women often urinate, change their sanitary protection or eat lunch squatting under the tea bushes. Some companies did provide a hut for women to eat in, but when these became rundown they did not restore them. The union has grown accustomed to how a concession so often reverts into a withholding.

The withholding is architecture as well as infrastructure. Estate accommodation bears the shape of its colonialist past, with workers most often housed in small barrack-type “line rooms.” Each room, at around 30 metres square, is a household. Social distancing is impossible. Despite more household bathrooms on estates, the 2017 World Bank study found that more than 92 percent of the estate sector water supplies were contaminated by fecal E. coli. An outbreak of COVID-19 on a plantation would be a lit fuse.

Red Flag is using Whatsapp and Skype

to keep in daily contact with local representatives. They have set up a 24-hour emergency hotline so they can respond quickly if needed. Both unions feel that workers are able to see more clearly the value of being organized. In a statement for International Workers Day on May 1, the unions declared: “Regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender, it is important that workers come together to challenge and demand their rights to necessary health and safety, job security and freedom from exploitation. This is the only way workers’ rights can be safeguarded.”

Collective Protective Equipment

In the global North, and largely because of trade union advocacy, we have become more alert to the increased exposure of some of our workers to COVID-19. The global extensiveness of the “frontline”—from the production of rubber in the personal protective equipment we have been demanding so passionately, to the residues of exploitation in the

cups of tea providing comfort in locked-down homes—seems to have passed us by. Yet, in a very real sense these distant lives are on and in our hands.

These chains of production and reproduction are also “underlying conditions.” They attenuate vulnerability to COVID-19. The most far-reaching change will come, as trade unions like the Domestic Workers Union and Red Flag have shown, when we reframe personal protection into a more collectivized and global equipping.

Rather than the belatedness of a politics of mourning for lives lost, global equipping is of the now. It means supporting distant grassroots and trade union activism, caring about and investigating global production chains, livable wages and debt cancellation.

Recognising and valuing our interdependent vulnerability is perhaps the best and most long-lasting protection.

6 May 2020

Source [New Politics](#).

Pandemic and Oil Crisis Could Make Second Arab Spring Return With a Vengeance

9 May 2020, by **Ashley Smith, Gilbert Achcar**

Ashley Smith: What will be the impact of the pandemic and global recession on the Middle East and North Africa?

Gilbert Achcar: There is one kind of impact which the region will share with the rest of the world. That is, of course, the big economic crisis that is unfolding and that is already far beyond anything the world has seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

But there is something specific to the

region, and that is oil and natural gas. The region is basically economically dependent on these resources. Their price has collapsed to the point of going below zero in the U.S. for a short while; the oil sellers paid buyers to take their oil, because they didn’t have any space left to store it.

Leaders in Saudi Arabia helped create this disaster when they launched their so-called oil price war in early March just as the coronavirus crisis struck. The combination of their overproduction and the contraction of

demand amid the pandemic and recession produced this enormous glut of oil and consequent collapse in its price.

The Middle East and North Africa region is in a revolutionary conjuncture because of global neoliberalism, the specific absolutist nature of many of the region’s states and their economic dependence on oil.

Of course, the price will eventually recover from the abysmal level it reached, but it will remain low

because the demand is depressed as a result of the shutdown of the economy during the pandemic. This will have a devastating economic impact on all the countries in the region.

This is true not only for oil-exporting countries but also other countries of the region. They too are dependent on oil revenues in the form of grants and investments in their economies from the oil-rich countries.

But the impact won't be the same on all. The oil-rich countries with small populations or high income per capita like Saudi Arabia will implement some austerity measures, but they have huge financial resources to draw upon.

The oil-exporting countries with large populations like Iran, Iraq and Algeria will face much bigger problems. Their economies are much weaker, they have much smaller financial reserves, and they will be forced to enact severe austerity measures, further angering populations that have staged mass revolts over the last year.

All other countries in the region that depend on the oil producers will be thrown into sharp crises. They will be suddenly deprived of Gulf money, which has helped economies like Egypt's stay afloat, thus increasing austerity and poverty. So, the entire region faces an even deeper social and economic crisis than what it has been in for the last decade.

AS: What has been the impact of the pandemic in the region so far?

GA: It has not been as apocalyptic as many feared, at least so far. Some rich countries like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have the means to deal with the pandemic. They take care of some sections of the population but not others, especially migrant manual workers.

These migrants already live in appalling conditions and could be devastated by the pandemic if the virus breaks out among them. But the rest of the population will be more insulated as they enjoy conditions similar to those of countries of the Global North, if not better.

By contrast, if the virus spreads into

countries like Egypt or Iraq, not to mention Yemen, where conditions for most of the population are very bad, it could have a terrible impact. Iran has already been severely struck, and Turkey is being in turn.

AS: What will the pandemic and collapse in oil prices do to the geopolitical balance of power in the region?

GA: Oil-rich Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia have huge financial reserves. So, they will not suffer too much of a setback in their regional influence. By contrast, Iran and its influence will be severely impacted. It is already suffering under U.S. sanctions, and these have greatly aggravated the consequences of the pandemic and collapse in oil prices.

On this question of a progressive alternative, Sudan is setting the example for the rest of the region. It has achieved the most advanced gains among the 10 countries that had gone through major uprisings.

The Saudi oil war has hammered Iran's economy, which was Riyadh's intention to begin with. The combination of all this on Iran is catastrophic. Its ability to consolidate its regional influence in its outposts in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon will be severely curtailed.

Behind Saudi Arabia stands the U.S., and their combined ability to shape the region geopolitically is much greater than Iran and its half-hearted friends, Russia and China, which are much less able to influence events.

But all great powers and regional powers are faced with big problems posed by the crisis. And, if struggle returns as the pandemic abates, the initiative could be seized again by popular forces.

AS: Let's discuss the state of the struggle from below. We have witnessed over the last year, a new wave of revolts that many call a "Second Arab Spring." What is the state of the struggle now?

GA: Last year we witnessed a global wave of resistance from Latin America to the Middle East and North Africa to Hong Kong. All these struggles have

been frozen in place by the pandemic.

In Hong Kong, the government and Beijing behind them have taken advantage of this situation to crack down on the movement. In the Middle East and North Africa, the story is the same. In Algeria, the weekly massive demonstrations have stopped, and arrests have taken place. In Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq, the struggle has been also on hold.

The pandemic has enabled the states to impose lockdowns "not for medical, but for political reasons. They were happy to do so, unlike Donald Trump in the U.S. or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil" not because they care more about the people's health but because they seized the opportunity to end social protests.

Once the pandemic is over, we should expect a resumption of struggle on an even higher scale due to the worsening of the social crisis. Already now, a resumption of the movement in both Lebanon and Iraq has started. People in Lebanon have been driven to do so by the collapse of the economy. They can no longer afford their basic needs like food.

AS: Sudan has been one of the key countries in the last year of revolt. What does the situation look like there today?

GA: It is in a state of flux like it has been since last July, when the movement reached a compromise on a transitional arrangement with the military. This agreement created what I would describe as a duality of power between the popular movement and the military, both coexisting within the same state. But this is only a tense and provisional stage; it will necessarily end with the victory of one of the two sides, the military or the movement.

The military have attempted to take advantage of the frozen struggle to block implementation of some key concessions they had to make. Of course, they may attempt something like a coup. But the popular movement would challenge any such attempt, returning the country back to open confrontation between the masses and the military.

What are the roots of the persistent waves of struggle in the region? What is part of the general pattern of global revolt that we have witnessed and what is particular to the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa?

Neoliberalism has had a common impact throughout the world but there are also regional and national specificities. Globally, the neoliberal drive to privatization, deregulation and internationalization has increased social inequalities and dismantled social safety nets. All of this has provoked uneven but worldwide resistance.

Internationalism has never been standing with one imperialism against another; it was always about solidarity between the oppressed people and working classes across borders.

But, as I've argued since the Arab Spring in 2011, the Middle East and North Africa region is in a specific, distinct and revolutionary conjuncture because of the interaction between global neoliberalism, the specific absolutist nature of many of the region's states and their economic dependence on oil.

This combination has produced a structural blockage in economic development. The regimes deny freedom to their people, rely on rents from oil and gas, and private money pours not in economic development but in speculative investments.

All of this has made the impact of neoliberalism far more severe than elsewhere in the world. For example, the region has held for many years the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world. Avenues to change this predicament through democratic elections are precluded.

You cannot vote a government out of office, change the administrative team and alter policy as you might be able to do in Europe or the U.S. That's why the uprisings went far beyond the protests in countries such as Chile, Spain or Greece.

The Middle East and North Africa has entered a long-term revolutionary process. Short of a radical

transformation of the whole social, economic and political structure, the area will remain in deep crisis.

AS: We have been through two waves of revolt in the region. What is the balance sheet so far? And what are the lessons of the revolutionary process?

GA: In this period, 10 countries in the region have gone through major uprisings. Six in 2011, four more in 2019 – almost half of the region's countries have experienced massive and sustained revolts.

That is a revolutionary shock wave at a regional level, comparable to what Europe witnessed at the end of World War I. This scale of the process proves that these revolts are not the usual resistance to neoliberalism.

The movement has matured politically from the first wave of uprisings to the second one. This is typical of long-term revolutionary processes like all others we have seen in history. They go through a learning curve – both the dominant classes and the popular movement learn.

In the Arab Spring in 2011, Islamic fundamentalist forces were key players. They formed a major part of the opposition to the dictatorships and when the uprisings started, they jumped on the bandwagon and tried to hijack the revolts for their reactionary aims.

Unfortunately, they succeeded in several countries, marginalizing the progressive forces that were not sufficiently organized and independent to provide a political alternative. As a result, we witnessed a clash between two counterrevolutionary poles – the old regimes, on the one hand, and the Islamic fundamentalists on the other hand.

In some countries, this took tragic, bloody forms – civil wars. At the regional level, the initial revolutionary phase morphed into a counterrevolutionary phase beginning in 2013. Since then, the old regimes managed to restore their power in the region in Syria and Egypt, and partly in Tunisia.

AS: How did the movement reemerge? How does the new wave of revolts differ from the first one?

GA: The movement never entirely went away. Despite the setback in 2013, the revolutionary process continued with occasional social explosions throughout the region, from Morocco to Tunisia, Sudan, Iraq and Jordan. Then, beginning in December 2018 in Sudan, a new wave of uprisings started and spread to Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon. The media dubbed this the Second Arab Spring.

In this new phase, the Islamic fundamentalist forces that were so prominent in the first phase played no role at all. In Sudan, they were originally aligned with the dictatorship. In Iraq and Lebanon, fundamentalist forces aligned with Iran were actually a main target of the uprisings.

In Algeria, part of the fundamentalists collaborated with the regime, and the movement did not let them play any role. Unfortunately, though, no progressive force was able to step in to provide a way forward nationally.

On this question of a progressive alternative, Sudan is setting the example for the rest of the region. It has achieved the most advanced gains among the 10 countries that had gone through major uprisings.

AS: What have progressive forces done in Sudan that stands out?

GA: They have built an organized movement operating on several levels. At the base, there are grassroots organizations in every neighborhood. These involve thousands of mostly young people who are, for the most part, unaffiliated with political parties but have been radicalized through the revolution of which they constitute the driving force. They are its critical conscience, which is why they are keen to preserve their local autonomy and refuse centralism.

These committees delegated the right to represent the popular movement to a coalition of professional associations that was formed underground before the uprising, comprised of doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers and

professors.

The Sudanese Professionals Association has played the role of coordinating and centralizing the struggles at the national level. It has entered a coalition with political parties to form a united front of the opposition to the dictatorship, forcing it to a transitional power-sharing agreement. That is the current situation of dual power that I described before.

Sudan thus shows the kind of organization it takes for a progressive popular movement to obtain major gains. That doesn't mean that the movement has achieved a final victory; a tense standoff remains between the movement and the dictatorship.

AS: Finally, what are the pivotal lessons for the region's left? And what should the posture of the international left be in relation to these struggles?

GA: There are two kinds of lessons. First, there are general lessons from the region for all progressive movements. Sudan's example of building a mass grassroots,

progressive struggle pole is useful for everyone throughout the world. Just imagine if the movement born around Sen. Bernie Sanders could take the shape we've seen in Sudan with grassroots neighborhood committees active throughout the country!

The second major lesson is about internationalism. The Arab Spring confronted the international left with the test of whether it would stand with the regimes or the popular movement in countries whose regimes were on bad terms with Washington. This was a challenge for some sections of the left who are used to binary thinking through the imperialist/anti-imperialist lens alone.

The uprisings challenged this framework. They have occurred both against regimes supported by the U.S., like Egypt, Tunisia or Bahrain, and against others opposed by the U.S., like Libya or Syria — the latter being supported by Russia, another imperialist power.

Far too many people purported to be on the left in the U.S. supported the Syrian regime because it is opposed

by the U.S. government, and refused to extend solidarity with the Syrian revolution, even in its initial popular phase. They kept defending the regime despite all the atrocities that it committed. Ironically, they did so in the name of anti-imperialism, when the Syrian regime was in fact backed by another imperialist power, Russia, which got deeply involved in the massacres in Syria.

This bears no relation to internationalism, which is above all solidarity of the exploited and oppressed. The left should always stand with the oppressed and exploited fighting for democracy and social justice, regardless of whether the state they are confronting is opposed to Washington or not.

Internationalism has never been standing with one imperialism against another; it was always about solidarity between the oppressed people and working classes across borders. We must revive this deep meaning of internationalism.

6 May 2020

Source [Truthout](#).

Socially Necessary Work

9 May 2020, by **Dianne Feeley**

In the midst of the pandemic, women are over-represented among workers deemed "essential" — 52% compared to 47% in the workforce as a whole. Of the 19 million U.S. health care workers, four out of five are women. At the lower end of the pay scale of the industry are 5.8 million who are working for less than \$30,000 a year, with few benefits. Of those, half are people of color, 83% of the total are women. Shockingly, the Centers for Disease Control found that 73% of the health care workers who have been infected with the novel coronavirus are women.

With the governors of most states announcing "stay at home" orders, we

see how vulnerable these "frontline" workers are. Whether grocery stores, nursing homes or hospitals, none of these workplaces are designed for emergencies. Rather capitalism's latest and most vicious form, neoliberalism, has stripped these spaces of excess capacity. There is no extra stock in their pantries or warehouses and no excess staff if someone falls ill. Instead, the staff is expected to work harder and make up the difference. In fact, this just-in-time model was invented to find where slack existed and force its elimination.

Even now, at the height of the pandemic, as hospitals struggle to receive those who are too sick to stay

at home with the virus, management is laying off hundreds of health care workers. As Trump remarked, when asked why he abolished the research team that was anticipating the next pandemic, as a businessman he didn't like the idea of people just standing around.

Hospitals are unprepared for emergencies, because that is not where they earn their profits. John Fox, the CEO of the largest hospital complex in Metro Detroit — Beaumont Health — announced, at the height of the epidemic, that it is losing \$100 million a month. This is primarily the result of having to reschedule lucrative surgeries and other

outpatient procedures. Profitability, not the community's health, is the bottom line!

Lack of preparation leads to severe complications. That's why nurses throughout the country have organized innovative protests — from gown-making parties, press conferences, socially distanced rallies to car caravans — against the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). With a quarter to a third of the hospital staff quarantined with the suspected virus, these actions insist on mandatory safe staffing and that hospitals coordinate resources rather than compete.

Wildfire in Nursing Homes

In the case of the country's 15,000 nursing homes with 1.5 million residents, the staff is 88% women, many of whom are African Americans or immigrants. Because the majority earn less than \$30,000 a year, many pick up extra hours at more than one facility. Since they generally have neither sick pay nor adequate health insurance, when sick they are put in a position of staying home and losing their pay or going to work and possibly infecting already vulnerable patients. With even less access to PPEs than hospital workers, when they return home, they are less likely than hospital workers to have the space to isolate themselves.

Since lean production dictates understaffing, management generally urges them to come in. Although local governments regulate these facilities, under neoliberalism the regulations have been relaxed. This occurs through fewer on-site inspections; when inspections do occur, management is often informed beforehand.

In Detroit, where all nursing home residents and staff were tested, 25% tested positive, with half being

asymptomatic. By April 20th, there were 124 recorded deaths. Particularly in New York City and New Jersey nursing homes have been so overwhelmed that bodies have been stacked up in garages. Reports are concluding that at least 20% of all Covid-19 deaths are nursing home patients and staff.

Perhaps now that the families of patients have raised the issue of how little nursing home staff is paid there will be greater awareness that the overwhelmingly female work force needs not only better pay, but safe working conditions and an extensive sick leave policy for starters.

Difficulties of "Stay in Place"

Eight out of ten homecare workers are women. Many have been laid off but do not qualify for unemployment. Many single women with children face not only financial insecurity but increased burdens of care in the home.

In addition to the usual household tasks, this includes working with their children on schoolwork. With schools closed and most day care reduced, mothers take on the bulk of childcare at a time when children have lost access to their friends and teachers. This is particularly difficult for women with disabilities or women whose children have one form of disability or another. It is also a problem for women when classroom learning is taking place online but there is no internet within the home.

Clearly, the pressure on women to care physically and emotionally for household members has increased.

Safety at Home?

Women have never been "safe" within their homes. Rather this space has always been a site of abuse, for women and often for their children.

According to The Guardian (March 28), domestic abuse in Hubei province tripled in February and, as the virus spread to various European countries, rose there by 20-50%.

Every member of the household is suffering from the trauma of a pandemic: the isolation from one's friends and relatives, from one's daily schedule, from the requirement of continuously sharing one's space, and fear of the unknown future. Under stress, a certain portion of men lash out at their women partners. With schools closed, violence against children, particularly children under five, is also likely to rise. At the same time, women and children have less opportunity to move away from the outburst or to tell someone what is happening.

Knowing that abusive behavior rises in moments of emergency, domestic abuse hotlines have publicized their willingness to help. They have found there are fewer phone calls but more text messages and use of email. However, some women's access to cell phones have ended because cell phone plans are disconnected when household expenses have to be cut. Finally, the shelters' ability to provide women and children with an alternative home is reduced in this moment.

The solutions to the pandemic cannot be a return to "normal" but a rebuilding of social solidarity. It not only means Medicare for All but viewing housing and education as rights. It means developing social networks that decrease the loneliness individuals face and increase their ability to make appropriate choices. It means prioritizing the reproductive work of society, placing greater importance on meeting people's needs than on producing commodities.

6 May 2020

Source
[Solidarity-<https://solidarity-us.org/socially-necessary-work/>].

Covid-19: Likely financial conflagrations to come

8 May 2020, by **Éric Toussaint**

The coronavirus pandemic must be seized as an opportunity to move towards a genuine revolution to radically change society in its way of life, its mode of ownership, its mode of production and its relationship with Nature. We must plan de-growth while improving living conditions. We must give absolute priority to common goods, and relocate manufacturing and services while adapting production to make it compatible with our struggle against the environmental crisis. The sphere of public services under citizen control must be massively enlarged. This revolution will only take place if the victims of the capitalist system and of patriarchal society are self-active, self-organizing and shunt the 1% and their lackeys away from the various centres of power to create real democratic power. A self-managing, anti-racist and feminist ecological-socialist revolution is needed.

In what follows I will examine measures taken by central banks as well as likely financial conflagrations.

Measures taken by central banks

Since mid-March 2020, major central banks have made massive attempts to prevent the current financial fire from spreading and to avoid other conflagrations. It is important to emphasize that their priority is to help major private banks or other financial institutions as well as, more generally, major shareholders of big corporations, whether they be in the manufacturing industry or not. Central banks help the 1% to the detriment of the 99% while claiming to serve the general interest. Central banks are trying to protect a wobbly globalized capitalist system.

As they swamp the financial markets with cash, they hope to circumvent the fire, as they did from 2008-2009 onward, which resulted in the current debacle.

It is essential to be aware of the various conflagrations that could occur within the coming days, weeks and months. It will help understand where the major central banks and governments are heading to, whatever their discourse.

But let us first remember the role played by central banks.

Reminder of measures taken by central banks since 2008

The policy followed by central banks is not the main cause of the current crisis of the capitalist system but it clearly contributes to it. Through their interference, notably to help big private corporations after 2008, they did prevent the capitalist system from going through a repetition of the big recession of the 1930s in its most brutal forms. I am referring to what happened from 1929 to 1945: a succession of bankruptcies, the suspension of debt payments by some thirty countries (including Germany, Britain, France, Belgium, Italy and 14 Latin American countries) [104], the victory of Nazism, [105] the Second World War, all of which were brutal shocks. But such interference resulted in the ingredients that have produced another financial crisis and did not actually boost production. [106] Another financial crisis broke out on a global scale in February-March 2020. This global crisis came after a number of smaller financial crises that the Fed

had attempted to smother in the United States throughout 2019. [107] While the mainstream media and governments constantly reiterate that the economic and financial crisis has been caused by the coronavirus pandemic, I have insisted that all the elements for a new financial crisis had been ready for several years and that coronavirus was merely the spark or the detonator of the stock-market crisis and not its cause. The amount of inflammable material in the financial sphere reached saturation point several years ago and it was well known that a spark could and would set off an explosion. No-one knew when the explosion would happen or what would spark it off, but it was clear that it was bound to happen. I also pointed out that the crisis in production had begun before coronavirus appeared on the scene, affecting the world's main economies from the first semester of 2019. [108]

The present financial crisis is global. All stock markets have been affected whether in Europe, the Americas, Asia-Pacific or Africa. Losses from 17 February to 17 March 2020 amount to between 20 and 40% depending on the stock market; only those in China limited their losses (the Shanghai stock market fell by 7%). [109] On 1 April 2020, the main stock markets on all continents collapsed again.

As this is being written, on 18 April 2020, the stock markets have regained between fifteen and twenty points between 17 March and 17 April 2020 thanks to the massive injections of cash and the huge bailout packages announced by the major central banks and governments. But the markets' situation has not stabilized, and more crashes can't be ruled out. It should also be stressed that the market value of shares of major corporations has fallen drastically: Boeing's stock

dropped 53% between 1 January 2020 and 18 April 2020; that of the biggest oil company, Exxon Mobil, dropped 38% and the second-ranking oil company, Chevron, 27%; the largest US bank, JPMorgan, lost 32%; the largest petrochemical group, Dow, 39%; Goldman Sachs lost 20% and Caterpillar 22%. On the Frankfurt exchange, since 1 January 2020, VW's stocks have lost 30% of their value, BMW's 30%, and Mercedes-Daimler's 41%; Siemens stocks are down 30%, and Deutsche Bank's 14%. On the Paris exchange, Airbus has lost 56%; among the banks Cr dit Agricole has lost 49%, Soci t  G n rale 55% and BNP Paribas 52%; Peugeot is down 45% and Renault 61%.

Measures announced after the 2007-2008 financial crisis

Measures announced in 2008 and 2009 to discipline the banks eventually proved to be no more than announcements. Central monitoring of banks in the Eurozone, the creation of a European fund to guarantee deposits, the prohibition of certain operations (concerning only 2% of total banking activity), the capping of bonuses, the transparency of banking activities or the new banking regulation rules, Basel III and IV... all these were merely recommendations, promises. At best, all measures that were actually taken were completely inadequate to deal with the problems at hand.

Yet this was already too much for the big banks and as a consequence, in January 2020, Trump's administration did away with a large part of the Volcker Rule, adopted during Barack Obama's administration. In January-February 2020, the Central Bank of China also allowed Chinese banks to take more risks so as to try and boost the economy. At the end of March 2020, the Fed, the ECB and the Basel Committee lifted almost all restrictions that had been imposed on banks after the 2007-2008 crisis. The enforcement of the Basel III agreement has been postponed for

several years. [110]

Sharp increase in private debt and new speculative bubbles created in the last ten years

The policies of the major central banks have led, on one hand, to a very sharp rise in companies' private debt, and on the other, to a speculative bubble on financial asset quotations. There has been grossly exaggerated stock-market capitalization, overvaluation and inordinate volume of the corporate bonds (= securities issued by companies in order to borrow) market, and property sector bubbles in the United States and China. All this, and especially the disastrous rescue of the private finance system since 2007-2008 using public money, has also given rise to an increase in public debt.

The speculative bubbles mentioned above are mostly caused by the policies adopted by the major central banks (the US Federal Reserve or Fed, the ECB, the Bank of England, over the last ten years, and the Bank of Japan since the burst of the property bubble in the 1990s). They injected thousands of billions of dollars, euros, pounds sterling and yen into private banks to keep them afloat. These policies were known as Quantitative Easing. The funds that the central banks distributed profusely were not used by banks and big capitalist companies from other sectors for productive investment. They were used to acquire financial assets: stocks and shares, sovereign public debt bonds, structured products and derivatives. This has produced a speculative bubble on the stock market, on the bond market (that is debt bonds), and in some places, in the property market. All the big companies are over-indebted.

The central banks' policies bear witness to the fact that their directors' decisions are entirely based on the short term interests of major private banks and large capitalist firms in

other sectors. They seek to prevent a chain of bankruptcies which would cause enormous losses to major shareholders.

Financial bubbles have been encouraged by central banks and are an integral part of how the financialized capitalist system functions

This policy is consistent with a characteristic of contemporary financialized capitalism: an ever-smaller share of the new value created is reinvested in production. [111]

A growing portion of new value is distributed to share-holders, in the form of dividends, in the form of share buybacks, in the form of speculative investments, especially structured products and derivatives. Fran ois Chesnais makes particular mention of an ever more massive inflow of the non reinvested profits of mainly industrial finance groups. [112] Michel Husson has also put his finger on this characteristic of contemporary capitalism several times.

The Fed's action in March 2020

Faced with a stock-market bubble which began bursting in the second half of February 2020, the Fed decided on 3 March 2020 to fix its benchmark federal funds rate in a target range of 1 % to 1.25 %, a fall of 0.50 %, the biggest over recent years as until now the Fed lowered its rates in 0.25 % stages. Faced with the continued slump of stock markets and especially of banks on the edge of bankruptcy, the Fed decided a further reduction on 15 March 2020, hitting even harder than on 3 March. This time it brought the rate down by 1 %.

So since 15 March the Fed's new federal funds rate is in a range of 0 to 0.25 %. Banks are being encouraged to increase their debts.

Not content with reducing interest rates, the Fed has again started injecting enormous amounts of dollars onto the inter-banking market. For once again, the banks have lost confidence in one another and are unwilling to lend one another money. The Chair of the Fed declared that his institution had planned, over the following weeks, to inject more than 1000 billion dollars of liquidities on the short-term markets, especially the repo market (5), in which it has already intervened massively between September and December 2019. The abbreviation "repo" (for repurchase agreement) designates the mechanism whereby banks finance themselves for a short period. They sell securities, with a commitment to repurchase them rapidly. For example they deposit US Treasury bonds or securities of companies with a triple A rating for 24 hours, as warranty or collateral for the loan they are making. In exchange for these bonds, they obtain cash at an interest rate close or equal to the federal funds rate.

Then, from 23 March, the Fed went further. It began to buy massive amounts of structured products linked to the property market, whether for residential property (Mortgage Backed Securities, MBS) or commercial property (Commercial Mortgage Backed Securities, CMBS). In the last week of March alone, it repurchased more than 250 billions worth of MBS and CMB from the banks.

The Fed is also purchasing other dangerous structured financial products: CLOs (Collateralized Loan Obligations) and CDOs (Collateralized Debt Obligations), which are rated as low as BBB- (the rating just above junk bonds). It is also buying shares in certain companies to try to limit their collapse.

What's more, it is making massive purchases of debt, including extremely high-risk debt, of private companies (corporate bonds).

On the Repo market, on 17 March, the Fed suddenly ramped up its activities by injecting 90 billion dollars in a single **day**. [113] Since that date, it has injected between 10 and 20 billion per day into the Repo market as soon as there is a shortage of cash.

In addition, it made an agreement with all the big central banks on other continents to supply them with hundreds of billions of dollars in order to avoid even greater international financial chaos. In summary, the Fed's intervention is significantly greater than in September 2008 on the day after the failure of Lehman Brothers and the collapse of the USA's biggest insurance company (AIG) and General Motors.

The ECB's actions in March 2020

Under the direction of Christine Lagarde, the European Central Bank (ECB), whose prime rate is 0%, announced on 12 March 2020 that it would be increasing its purchases of private and public financial securities (bonds and structured financial products, on the one hand, and government bonds on the other). It will also increase the volume of advantageous credits granted to banks in the middle and long term.

Banks who promise not to reduce the volume of loans they grant to the private sector can get ample financing from the ECB at a negative rate (-0.75%). Note that there are no penalties if they fail to keep those promises. That means that they actually make money when they borrow from the ECB - a virtual subsidy. Banks repay less to the ECB than the amount they borrow. If they borrow €100, they repay only €99.25

And as we mentioned above, the Fed, the ECB and other central banks, beginning in March 2020, have reduced the few measures of "control" that had been taken following the preceding financial crisis of 2007-2008 and are promising almost unlimited laxity on the pretext that banks are the key intermediaries of economic recovery.

Central banks and the other regulators allow big banks to take even more risks

The Fed, the ECB and other central banks have announced that banks no longer need to adhere to rules regarding the minimum amount of cash they must have on hand in order to face a financial upheaval. Similarly, the central banks have reduced their requirements regarding the ratio between the bank's equity and its commitments (its balance sheet). This means that the banks can now take even more risks than before. In terms of the freedom banks are allowed, we have more or less gone back to the situation that existed prior to the crisis in 2007-2008.

The big banks have been clamouring for exactly that for years. They had already succeeded in reducing the requirements placed on them by the central banks and the regulatory authorities. Now they are being given licence to go back to doing more or less whatever they please.

The British financial daily, the *Financial Times*, calculated that measures announced by the different central banks over a period of three weeks have reduced the reserves and equity that the banks are supposed to hold permanently by 500 billion dollars. [114] The FT writes: "By allowing banks to operate with lower levels of capital, regulators are boosting their firepower to absorb higher demand for loans as well as rising customer defaults and a deterioration in credit quality in their loan books."

The central banks are asking the big banks to temporarily

suspend payments of big dividends to their shareholders and stop buybacks of their own shares

To attempt to limit the popular discontent that will well up once the people become aware of the gifts they're giving to the private banks, the central banks, and in particular the Fed and the ECB, are asking banks to stop buying back their own shares on the stock market and to limit dividend payments. On 27 March, the ECB announced that it was asking the two hundred biggest banks in the Eurozone to stop, for a limited period, buybacks of their own shares.

You will recall that banks in the USA have, over the last ten years, bought back their own shares for a total of 860 billion dollars, and in 2019 alone buybacks reached a total of 47.5 billion dollars. Added to that is the nearly 80 billion dollars banks paid in the form of dividends to their

shareholders in 2019. And the European banks have done exactly the same as their US counterparts.

As mentioned above, the major US banks have announced that they are bringing repurchase of their own shares to a halt until September 2020. However they are pushing hard to continue to be able to distribute dividends to their share-holders even as they receive massive aid from the public purse!

Note that the US banks have just boasted to their share-holders that they made enormous profits thanks to massive sales of shares on the stock markets during the first quarter of 2020. Banks get commission on all share sales, right across the spectrum. The more shares change hands on the markets, the more money the banks earn, even if market values fall. According to the *Financial Times* of 26 March 2020 the revenues of US banks relating to stock-market activities increased by 30 % in February-March 2020. This increase concerns the 12 biggest banks. This will not prevent them from declaring losses on their global activities, to avoid paying tax.

The next conflagrations

Before the start of the crisis, the market for high-risk, high-yield debt securities reached a volume of about 2,200 billion dollars (this refers to bonds that have credit ratings from BB to C -see the graphics). The market for better-quality debt bonds ("investment grade", that go from AAA to BBB) was much bigger and reached about 4,500 billion dollars. The trouble is that since March 2020, the credit rating agencies downgrade **on a daily basis** dozens of bonds (for hundreds of millions or billions of dollars). In the USA, this concerns debt securities issued by big corporations such as Ford and General Motors. At the beginning of April, debt bonds issued by Ford for a total of 36 billion dollars were downgraded by the credit rating agencies. They went from BBB (investment grade) to BB (i.e. junk bonds). So now they are considered as high-risk. Altogether by March 2020, 90 billion dollars of debt securities considered to be quite good quality had been downgraded to the high-risk category (junk). [