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The coronavirus pandemic crisis intensifies

Capitalism is at war with society

The coronavirus pandemic is developing into a social, economic and political crisis on a scale that is without precedent. Yesterday's drastic fall in global markets and especially in the United States, where Wall Street recorded its greatest one-day loss since 1987, arose from the recognition that the pandemic will massively impact the world economy and profoundly disrupt the existing social order.

Estimates of the probable scale of deaths from the illness are causing growing anxiety. The total number of confirmed infections worldwide is approaching 150,000 and rising exponentially, but this vastly understates reality. Due to the lack of adequate testing and the long latency period before symptoms, the actual number is far higher. The official death toll is now over 5,000, and the lives of countless millions throughout the world are in danger.

Italy is deepening its nationwide lockdown, with virtually all stores closed and streets emptied. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that 60 to 70 percent of the population will become infected, meaning that millions will require intensive care or die. Iran has reportedly begun digging mass graves as the epidemic spirals out of control. France is closing all schools and universities. In the United States, major public sporting and entertainment events have been canceled, and grocery stores have quickly run out of basic necessities.



Servpro cleaning workers are sprayed as they exit the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Wash., Thursday, March 12, 2020, at the end of a day spent cleaning inside the facility near Seattle. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the inability of the capitalist system to deal with such a crisis. Governments throughout the world have responded with a staggering level of incompetence and disarray. No preparations have been made for an entirely foreseeable disaster. Health care systems, starved of resources, are overwhelmed.

The complete incapacity of the United States, the richest capitalist country in the world, to respond to this emergency is an indictment of a government and of the entire economic system.

In his national address on Wednesday night, President Donald Trump epitomized the indifference of the capitalist oligarchy to the lives of millions of people. His nationalist diatribe placed blame for the “foreign virus” on China and Europe.

Trump’s speech came after weeks in which the president, focused entirely on the impact of the crisis on the stock market, proclaimed that everything was fine, that coronavirus was not a serious threat. He could not bring himself to express an ounce of sympathy for the masses of people in the United States and internationally who are seeing their lives upended. He announced no measures to address the absence of testing or the extreme shortage of health care facilities.

It is not, however, just a matter of the sociopathic personality of the present occupant of the White House. Trump is the product of American capitalism, of a society dominated by unprecedented levels of inequality, in which vast wealth has been accumulated by the financial elite at the expense of everything else.

The class character of the government response was starkly revealed on Thursday. The Federal Reserve, in a desperate and futile attempt to counteract the selloff on Wall Street, announced that it was allocating \$1.5 trillion to buy up stocks and other assets. The US Congress, on the other hand, is haggling over a few billion dollars in assistance to those who are thrown out of work or otherwise impacted—a drop in the bucket compared to what is urgently required.

The outbreak of the pandemic and its consequences can only be understood within the context of the development of global capitalism over the past four decades. These four decades have revealed all the socially reactionary characteristics of a system based on private ownership of the means of production, in which all considerations of social need are subordinated to the drive for profit and vast personal wealth. The motto of the capitalist oligarchy is: “If the accumulation of our billions requires the death of millions, so be it.”

In 1987, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher infamously declared that “There is no such thing as society.” Thatcher’s dictum was the justification for a wholesale attack on social programs and infrastructure and a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich. For four decades, the ruling elites, above all in the United States, have engaged in social plunder. All policy has been based on the private enrichment of the oligarchs at the expense of society.

Both political parties, Democrat and Republican, have presided over this social arson. For the past three years, as Trump has waged his assault on workers and immigrants, the Democrats proclaimed that the overriding threat to the American people came from Russia. All social opposition to the Trump regime was subordinated to the reactionary agenda of the military and intelligence agencies.

Now we see the consequences. More than any other country, the United States has revealed a level of unpreparedness that is nothing less than criminal. On Thursday, the director of the Ohio Health Department stated that evidence of community spread indicates that one percent of residents in the state are infected, or 117,000 people. Only five individuals have actually tested positive.

The Centers for Disease Control has the capacity to process only 300 to 350 tests a day. In practice it is doing even less. This very week, even as the contagion spread throughout the country, there were only eight tests on Tuesday and none on Wednesday. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, acknowledged in

testimony before Congress on Thursday that “the system is not really geared to what we need right now... That is failing.”

As the disease spreads, the health care system in the United States will be quickly overwhelmed. The number of hospital beds and intensive care units is utterly inadequate to meet the expected demand, meaning that tens of thousands of people will simply not be able to get care, vastly increasing the death toll. Health care workers face a shortage of critical supplies, including masks and other essential gear, exposing themselves and their patients to heightened risk.

Workplaces are not equipped to ensure safety, with many workers reporting unsanitary conditions, a lack of soap and even hot water. On Thursday, an autoworker at a Fiat Chrysler plant in Indiana tested positive for the disease, but the plant, a critical bottleneck for FCA production, is being kept open. Service workers, most of whom have no paid sick leave, are dangerously exposed.

As schools and colleges are being closed, hundreds of thousands of students face eviction from their dormitories with no plans in place for alternative housing. Parents are being forced to take unpaid time off work or find childcare with nothing in place to assist them.

The same story is repeated in every country. Governments are floundering to safeguard the profits of corporations as millions face the consequences with no assistance. There is no coordination or plan to address the pandemic. The World Health Organization, which supposedly exists to coordinate responses to health emergencies, is powerless, and its guidelines and regulations are being universally ignored.

Precious time was wasted as the global pandemic gathered fatal momentum. When the pandemic first manifested itself in Wuhan, Washington was interested in the development only from the standpoint of how the crisis in China might be exploited to the geopolitical advantage of the United States. The media paid only limited attention to the threat and issued no calls for urgent and globally coordinated action.

In contrast, basing itself on an international socialist perspective that prioritizes the common universal interests of the working class, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality parties recognized the danger and sounded the alarm. The *World Socialist Web Site* **warned** this past January 28: “The outbreak has exposed the enormous vulnerability of contemporary society to new strains of infectious disease, dangers for which no capitalist government has adequately

prepared.” The WSWS wrote that the urgent need for internationally coordinated action to fight the pandemic was undermined by national conflicts:

At a time when rational planning across national borders is critical to combat the global spread of a virulent disease, the United States and China are locked in a growing trade conflict in what has been called a new “cold war.” Even as new pathogens require the scientific resources of every continent to combat, the countries of the world are building metaphorical and literal walls.

The defense of human civilization against the threat of global pandemics, just like climate change and the growing threat of ecological disasters, requires a level of planning and global cooperation of which capitalism is incapable. Society has outgrown the capitalist system and the arbitrary divisions it imposes on the world. The provision of the most existential social needs requires rational planning. That is, it requires socialism.

Six critical weeks have been wasted by the ruling oligarchs and the global threat has grown exponentially. Action must be taken.

The essential principle that must guide the response to the crisis is that the needs of the working people of the world must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private capitalist wealth.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International demand a massive, internationally coordinated mobilization of social resources to combat the coronavirus, including the allocation of trillions of dollars to ensure access to testing and the highest-quality medical care for all those infected. The class-based and profit-driven system of health care must be abolished, replaced with equal and universal coverage. A massive public works program must be initiated to produce desperately needed medical equipment.

Immediate measures must be taken to safeguard the health of workers. Workplaces where there is a danger of the spread of the virus must be shut down, with full income to those affected. Where schools are closed, parents must be given paid time off. College students forced out of dormitories must be provided safe housing. There must be a moratorium on evictions and utility shutoffs, combined with a moratorium on rent payments and other forms of emergency assistance.

All those who claim, like Bernie Sanders, that anything can be done without a frontal assault on the capitalist system itself are peddling lies. In a speech on Thursday, Sanders

declared that as many as 400,000 could die from the coronavirus, and that the crisis “is on a scale of a major war.” Sanders, however, repeated his claim that measures to address the crisis can be achieved through the actions of both the Democratic and Republican parties.

In fact, what the crisis proves is the urgent necessity of a mass political movement of the working class in the United States and internationally against capitalism and for the socialist reorganization of world economy. What we are witnessing is the consequence of a society organized on the basis of profit. A society in which three individuals own more than half the population is incapable of resolving any of the great problems confronting mankind.

The giant banks and corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic control. The vast fortunes of the rich must be expropriated to make funds available to ensure universal access to health care, housing, utilities and other social needs. All of economic life must be reorganized on the basis of a global, planned economy, removing the obstacle of private property and the profit motive. The last consideration on anyone’s minds should be the impact on corporate profits and Wall Street share values.

The pandemic has laid bare the inescapable necessity of a fundamental restructuring of society. This is not the first time in history that a great crisis has demonstrated that human progress is inseparable from the struggle against inequality. In an important new book, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, historian Walter Scheidel writes: “Throughout recorded history, the most powerful leveling invariably resulted from the most powerful shocks. Four different kinds of violent ruptures have flattened inequality: mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state failure, and lethal pandemics. I call these the Four Horsemen of Leveling.” Each of these Horsemen is now visible.

The future of humanity is at stake. Capitalism is at war with society. The working class, under the banner of international socialism, must wage war against capitalism.

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