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Class Struggles and Social Distancing



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

On the day after armed protestors stormed the Capitol building in Michigan to demand that the whole economy be re-opened, the news included reports that Michigan has the highest current death rates in the United States from the novel coronavirus. That is a serious problem.

Voluntary good will in avoiding risks of infection during a pandemic is also problematic. Why? Because those of us able to shelter in place must still rely on those we call essential workers to work in hospitals and supermarkets, to transport products, and to haul trash. If

those workers do not get essential protection gear and support to do their jobs, in some cases they also become expendable workers.

In any complex society there will be a division of labor. That does not mean that drastic divisions in wages and classes follow like a law of nature. This pandemic is also a public demonstration of the fractures and failures of the health care, housing and education systems in the United States.

Elon Musk recently called social distancing rules that limit production in one of his factories “fascist.” Thomas Friedman wrote a column in The New York Times praising Sweden’s more relaxed public rules as a model for reopening our own economy, without mentioning the much higher public trust of Swedish citizens in their public institutions. Even so, Sweden does have a higher death rate, especially among the elderly, than other Scandinavian countries with similar histories of social democracy.

Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, has promised to veto any single payer Medicare for all bill that he may be asked to sign. This pandemic has not yet changed his mind.

Joe Biden, what a guy! With his public record of collegiality with southern white supremacists, with his support for war and empire, with his opposition to gay marriage before gay voters were courted in earnest, and with his pawing and sniffing of women—just cue the tune here from H.M.S. Pinafore — is he the very model of a modern major Democrat?

Oh, but we have ventured far beyond satire when Linda Hirshman, a veteran feminist campaigner, writes a column titled “I believe Tara Reade. I’m voting for Joe Biden.” And got it published on May 9, 2020, in The New York Times. Sacrifices must be made, she argues, and no sacrifice is too great if only Trump loses the White House and Biden gains it.

Any reforms we might gain in the electoral system, including ranked choice voting, will still not change the class structure of this country. The New Deal was not a Christmas present from FDR. It was extracted from the capitalist state by workers willing to strike and even occupy workplaces. Direct class struggle against managerial union captains and against politicians loyal to the corporate state is part of American history. Whenever more workers go back to work, the lessons learned from past labor struggles and from this pandemic will also advance a new era of class struggles.

As for the middle classes, we can appeal to morality without relying on moralism. A considerable number of middle class people are indeed thinking people, and many have working class members in their extended families. Others are simply devoted to the gospel of Me and Mine.

Quite aside from any moral appeals, however, a good number of voters and citizens will respond to the case for enlightened self-interest. In countries that have raised the ground floor of social democracy in basic goods and services such as health care, housing, and education, the public record shows that the middle classes also gain a more secure standard of living.

The Civil War in this country divided many family members from each other, neighbors from neighbors, friends from friends. Given the dominant Christian religion, there was also a strong narrative of national redemption after that war. Yet in the era of Reconstruction, a counterrevolution was waged against the legal rights of black people, even as big business waged an ongoing economic war on all workers. Indeed, Abraham Lincoln stated in a letter to a friend not long before his death that the growing power of corporations made him even more anxious than had the Civil War, and he regarded that power as an even greater threat to the republic.

All political language now in use by the career politicians of the corporate parties is corrupt. If we are present among “progressives” who only snipe at Trump but otherwise vote by rote, then we have a duty to change the conversation. Among family members, among neighbors, among friends. Better we should have these civil arguments before the legitimate course of class struggles takes the more dangerous turn of a civil war.

If our social circles include persons who are political imbeciles– whether through habitual exits from reality, or through the deforming power of their class and education– then a choice must be made. Either talk about anything except politics to preserve the peace, or decide to put social distancing to a new use.

Whether the Democratic Party is worth the effort of reform is an old argument not yet resolved. Certainly Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, and a few others are among the better members of Congress. Even so, Congress remains the front office of the ruling class. However you decide to vote, you can also choose to fight the corporate state.

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