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Capitalism vs. socialism: The pandemic and the global class struggle

It is one year since the World Health Organization (WHO), on January 30, 2020, declared that the outbreak of COVID-19 constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus issued a statement accompanying the declaration noting that 98 cases had been reported in 18 countries outside of China. “Although these numbers are still relatively small compared to the number of cases in China,” he said, “we must all act together now to limit further spread.”

One year later, the total number of cases has passed 100 million. The total number of deaths has reached 2,225,000. The daily death toll is the highest it has ever been, with more than 14,000 people succumbing to the virus every day.



Doctors and nurses kneel in front of Downing Street in London, Thursday, May 28, 2020. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

In the United States, there have been 26,107,110 cases, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center, and the death toll has reached 440,000. In India, there are more than 10 million reported cases and 154,000 deaths. In Brazil, more than 9 million cases and

223,000 deaths. In the United Kingdom, nearly 4 million cases and 106,000 deaths. In Italy, 2.5 million cases and more than 88,000 deaths.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, at the earliest stages of the crisis, identified the pandemic as a “trigger event,” comparable to World War I, that would intensify and accelerate the profound contradictions of the global capitalist system. The health crisis would evolve inevitably into a global social and political crisis. Medical measures alone would not bring the pandemic under control.

Rather, the struggle to contain the pandemic would develop into a class struggle, as it became increasingly clear that the major classes in society—the capitalist class and the working class—have irreconcilably opposed interests. These antagonistic positions find expression in the conflict between the capitalist and socialist programs.

The positions of the ruling class proceed from the defense of capitalist property: the private ownership of the means of production and the geostrategic interests of the nation state. The positions of the working class strive objectively toward socialism: the ending of the profit system and exploitation of labor, and its replacement with the scientifically planned reorganization of economic life on the basis of human needs and the global unification of mankind through the abolition of the nation-state system.

One year into the crisis, the pandemic has starkly revealed the class divide that separates the capitalist and socialist programs.

1. The capitalist program insists that the response to the pandemic must prioritize saving the financial markets over saving lives.

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2. The capitalist program asserts that pandemic policy must be driven by profit interests.

The socialist program advocates that medical policy must be guided by science.

3. The capitalist program advocates a program of “herd immunity,” allowing the virus to spread with as few restrictions as possible while vaccinations are produced and distributed.

The socialist program calls for all measures to impede virus transmission until the necessary number of people to stop community spread of the virus has been inoculated.

4. The capitalist program insists, in accordance with its “herd immunity” strategy, that factories and other workplaces be kept open for business.

The socialist program insists that all nonessential workplaces be closed down until inoculated workers can safely return to their jobs.

5. The capitalist program demands that schools be reopened, claiming falsely that there is little risk to students and teachers.

The socialist program, based on scientific evidence that schools are a major source of virus transmission, demands that schools remain closed until the pandemic has been brought under control.

6. The capitalist program seeks to restrict social expenditures aimed at counteracting the economic impact of the pandemic on the great mass of the people, while demanding that central banks provide unlimited support for the financial markets and large corporations.

The socialist program demands full income compensation to workers and small businesses for the duration of the crisis. The resources for this critical social rescue plan will be obtained through the immediate restitution of the trillions of dollars extended to the large corporations under the provisions of the CARES Act, and the expropriation of the pandemic profiteers who have made tens of millions and even billions of dollars as a result of unlimited Federal Reserve support for the financial markets.

7. The capitalist program promotes a policy of vaccination nationalism, restricting and opposing equitable distribution of vaccines throughout the world.

The socialist program, recognizing that the coronavirus can be eradicated only through a scientifically directed international strategy, calls for a globally coordinated inoculation program.

The divergent class interests in responding to the coronavirus pandemic are behind the increasingly sharp political divisions. The ruling class, fearful of mounting opposition to its profit-driven program of herd immunity, is encouraging the growth of fascist organizations.

The working class, in developing its own response to the pandemic, is recognizing the need for class unity, militant class action and, above all, an international socialist and revolutionary political strategy.

The policies fought for by the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and those of the parties and organizations throughout the world that are affiliated with the International Committee of the Fourth International articulate and advance the objective interests of the American and international working class. The time has come for all those who support the program of socialism to become actively engaged in the struggle for its realization.

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