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Capitalism and mortality: Death rate soars for middle-aged US workers

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4 November 2015

A study published this week in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* documents a sharp rise in the mortality rate for white, middle-aged working-class Americans over the past fifteen years. The report's authors are Nobel laureate Angus Deaton and Anne Case, both economists at Princeton University.

Their calculations show that the rising death rate since 1999 for this segment of the population translates into 96,000 more deaths than if the mortality rate had remained flat. Had the rate continued on its declining trajectory for the period 1978-1998, the authors state, there would be 500,000 more people alive today in the United States.

“Only HIV/AIDS in contemporary times has done anything like this,” commented Deaton.

The increase in the mortality rate is due mainly to a dramatic rise in the rate of deaths from suicide, drug abuse and alcoholism—all expressions of social and personal crisis.

Dr. Case and Dr. Deaton found that the overall mortality rate (measured as the number of deaths each year) for white, non-Hispanic adults between the ages of 45 and 54 increased by 34 per 100,000 between 1999 and 2013. For those with a high school education or less, the rate

increased by 134 per 100,000 (reaching 735.8 per 100,000) over this same period. This is a rise of 22 percent. In the study, education level served as an approximate stand-in for income level.

The increase in mortality for middle-aged white Americans with a high school education or less is attributed to: poisonings (including drug overdoses), which rose from 13.7 to 58.0 deaths per 100,000 (an increase of 400 percent); suicide, which rose from 21.8 to 38.8 deaths per 100,000 (an increase of 78 percent); and chronic liver cirrhosis (caused by alcoholism), which rose from 26.7 to 38.9 per 100,000 (an increase of 46 percent).

The authors also document the growth of morbidity, or ill health, within this social layer, showing that reports of good health fell, while reports of physical pain, psychological distress and poor health rose sharply.

The study confirms and provides additional substantiation for the conclusions of previous reports, including one from September of this year that found a dramatic decline in life expectancy for poorer middle-aged Americans.

Behind these figures lies an immense social retrogression and sharpening of class divisions. They reflect a catastrophic decline in the social position of the working class resulting from the protracted decay of American capitalism and a relentless, decades-long assault by the ruling class on all of the past social gains achieved in the course of a century of bitter class struggle.

While white workers, particularly white men, are routinely denounced as “privileged” by the pseudo-left proponents of racial and gender politics, they have seen perhaps the most dramatic reversal in their conditions of life. Middle-aged blacks still have a higher mortality rate than whites, but the difference between the two groups is closing rapidly.

Consider the experiences of the age group involved. A worker aged 50 in 2013 was born in 1963, at the height of the postwar economic boom. He or she would have reached employment age around 1980, the onset of a ruling-class offensive aimed at driving down workers’ wages and living standards and dismantling social services and public infrastructure. With the “deindustrialization” of America, huge swaths of industry were shut down, working-class cities were devastated, and millions of decent-paying jobs were wiped out.

This social counterrevolution has only accelerated under the Obama administration in the years since the financial crisis of 2008. The Wall Street crash of that year, triggered by the greed and criminality of the financial elite, has been utilized by that same financial aristocracy to strengthen its control over every aspect of social and political life in the United States.

The number of manufacturing jobs in the United States peaked at 19.5 million in 1970, falling to 17.4 million in 1999 and collapsing to just over 12 million by 2013. The share of working-age men between the ages of 25 and 54 who are not working has tripled since the late 1960s. Those jobs that are available pay less and less. Households headed by someone with a high school education or less have seen a 19 percent decline in their inflation-adjusted income.

Immense resources have been diverted into financial speculation, with the stock market becoming the primary mechanism for redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich. The share of national income going to the top one percent has nearly tripled, increasing from about 8 percent in the 1960s and 1970s to more than 20 percent today.

The consequences have been disastrous for predominantly African American cities such as Detroit, but the most concentrated growth of poverty in recent years has occurred in the suburbs—an increase of 64 percent from 2000 to 2011, according to one study.

Workers who are now middle-aged have experienced an unending decline in living standards. They have had their homes taken away, their retirement and health benefits gutted, their life savings wiped out. Millions are drowning in debt, exhausted by overwork or scraping by on unemployment, often unable to provide for their families and facing the permanent stress of economic insecurity. The “American dream” has become the American nightmare.

The organizations through which workers previously resisted the dictates of the corporations have collapsed. The trade unions have become labor syndicates, serving as a police force for the corporations to suppress the class struggle and impose mass layoffs, wage cuts and speedup. Under these conditions, the anger and frustration of workers, unable to find any organized expression, have in many cases been turned inward and taken personally and socially destructive forms.

This, however, is not a permanent state of affairs. The increase in mortality for large sections of the American population testifies to the failure of the capitalist system and the bankruptcy of all of its agencies, including the official unions. The objective crisis of capitalism is already giving rise to a growth of social opposition and anti-capitalist sentiment, which will inevitably find expression in a new upsurge of class struggle.

That the ruling class has nothing to offer to address the spiraling social crisis is reflected in the lack of serious attention paid to the shocking findings of the Princeton economists. In an earlier period, they would have been treated as a national disgrace.

Today, the Democrats and Republicans compete with each other in slashing social programs. A decline in life expectancy is seen as a positive good by a ruling class that is determined to cut spending on health care and pensions in order to finance an ever-expanding stock market bubble.

Under capitalism, society is marching backwards. The only social force that can reverse this counterrevolution is the working class. The growing sentiment of anger and opposition must assume an organized, political and revolutionary form. The turn is to socialism and the building of the revolutionary leadership, the Socialist Equality Party, required to lead the struggle for the socialist transformation of society.