

Capitalism and America's addiction epidemic

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The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report Friday showing that nearly 13,000 people died from heroin overdoses in 2015, up four-fold from the 3,036 deaths reported in 2010. The overall incidence of overdoses from all drugs has more than doubled since 1999.

The drug epidemic affects all ages, genders and races. The overdose rate for the 55–64 age group has gone up nearly five-fold, while the 45–54 age group had the highest rate of overdoses overall.

Whites had the highest rate of overdose deaths of any ethnicity, more than double the combined death rate for blacks and Latinos. The overdose death rate for whites, which was lower than that of blacks in 1999, has more than tripled since then.

What is behind the shocking and tragic growth in drug overdoses?

The drug epidemic has been concentrated in former coal mining regions such as Kentucky, West Virginia and Tennessee, along with so-called “rust-belt” states such as Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania. These areas of the country have been hardest hit by decades of deindustrialization, mass layoffs and wage-cutting, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing ever since.

Industrial and mining towns in these states have been turned into wastelands, littered with the rusting hulks of factories that once employed thousands of people. In places like Pontiac, Michigan; Akron, Ohio; and Huntington, West Virginia decent-paying jobs are scarce, while schools and community centers have been closed by the dozens.

The social distress that finds a particularly concentrated expression in the rust belt exists throughout the country. In 2015, for the first time in 23 years, US life expectancy decreased, led by a sharp increase in mortality rates for white Americans.

Last month, a survey by the Young Invincibles found

that millennials earn 20 percent less than their parents did at the same stage in life, despite being better-educated. Homeownership rates have hit their lowest levels since 1965, with record numbers of young people being too poor to move out of their parents' homes.

At the other end of the age spectrum, indebtedness among seniors has increased dramatically and household debt as a whole is soaring.

There is a palpable sense that American society is going backward. The drug epidemic is a malignant expression of the fact that millions of people see no prospect for living an economically secure and fulfilling life.

The conditions of life for working people, whose incomes have been stagnant or declining for decades, stand in the starkest contrast to the phenomenal enrichment of the ruling elite, whose wealth has more than doubled since 2009, driven by an unprecedented stock market boom.

In its quest for cheap and easy profits at any social cost, the American health care system, dominated by the pharmaceutical industry, the insurance giants and for-profit hospital chains, has turned to over-prescribing opioid painkillers. As a result, over a third of Americans now use prescription painkillers, whether obtained legally or illegally. This is a higher percentage of the population than the portion that smokes or uses smokeless tobacco.

Alongside the economic underpinnings of the social crisis there are the crippling intellectual and cultural effects of a quarter-century of endless war and political reaction. War, xenophobia, chauvinism, the worship of money and power—all are extolled by the ruling elite, its political parties and the media and entertainment establishment. These are the symptoms of an economic and political system breaking down under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

The period since the baseline of the CDC report,

1999, has seen repeated eruptions of protest and struggle against the policies of war and social reaction carried out by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Fourteen years ago this month, the largest anti-war demonstrations in US and world history took place in cities across America and around the world in opposition to the impending US war in Iraq. This movement against war was suppressed and dissipated by being channeled behind the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate John Kerry.

Four years later, millions of workers and youth went to the polls to express their hatred for the policies of war and austerity of the Bush administration and elect the candidate who promised “hope” and “change,” Barack Obama. The hopes invested in Obama turned into bitter disillusionment and anger as the Democratic administration continued and intensified the right-wing, militaristic policies of Bush and oversaw a further growth of social inequality.

The 2016 election was dominated by mass popular hostility to the political establishment and both parties of big business. This took a left-wing form in the mass support among working people and particularly youth for Bernie Sanders, who garnered 13 million votes in the Democratic presidential primaries by presenting himself as a socialist and opponent of the “billionaire class.” Sanders cynically used his anti-capitalist pretensions to divert popular opposition back behind the Democratic Party, throwing his support to the embodiment of the Democrats’ repudiation of social reform and open embrace of Wall Street and the CIA—Hillary Clinton.

This opened the way for Trump, the personification of the financial oligarchy, to exploit mass discontent on a right-wing, pseudo-populist and chauvinist basis and win the election.

The political impasse caused by the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the two-party system, reinforced by the corporatist trade unions, has fueled the frustrations and dashed hopes that foster anti-social acts, from mass shootings to drug addiction.

But the readiness of the working class and youth to fight has once again found expression in the mass protests since Trump’s inauguration. The Women’s March one day after the inauguration was the biggest international protest since the February 2003 demonstration on the eve of the Iraq War, and

demonstrations against Trump’s assault on immigrants and democratic rights more broadly have continued ever since.

Once again, there is a concentrated attempt to divert and dissipate social opposition by channeling it behind the Democratic Party, whose central preoccupation is creating the conditions for war against Russia. The urgent lesson that must be drawn is the need to reject all such efforts and break decisively from the Democratic Party and all parties and politicians of the capitalist class.

The social crisis expressed in the surge in drug overdoses can be overcome only in a struggle to mobilize the working class in the US and internationally against the capitalist system, the source of poverty, inequality and war.



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