

A socialist response to the opioid crisis

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A new report has revealed the horrific impact of the opioid crisis across Michigan, which requires an emergency response.

The report, produced by the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) and Appriss Health, found a 30 percent increase in drug-related overdose deaths in Michigan between 2013 and 2015. Most of these deaths were from opioids, a class of drug that includes illegal forms such as heroin, as well as many pharmaceutical forms used to treat pain, such as hydrocodone and oxycodone (known by the brand names Vicodin and OxyContin, respectively).

The report shows that six of the top ten cities for overdose deaths in the state were in Downriver, the 18 suburban Michigan cities and townships southwest of Detroit. The six cities are Lincoln Park, Wyandotte, Ecorse, Flat Rock, Woodhaven and Southgate. The community of Lincoln Park topped the overdose death rate among Michigan cities with 3.2 deaths per 1,000 people. In total deaths, Detroit topped Michigan cities, with 447 fatal overdoses over three years. However, its death rate was a third of Lincoln Park's.

The drug largely responsible for the increase in many areas is a specific type of opioid called fentanyl, which is so strong that it is used to tranquilize elephants and carry out executions. It is cheaper and about 50 times more potent than heroin. According to preliminary calculations, about three-quarters of fatal overdoses in Wayne County were tied to fentanyl, an eight-fold increase in three years.

The opioid epidemic has touched every part of the state. A recent report on Macomb County, a suburb north of Detroit, showed that the number of deaths

involving fentanyl jumped 38 percent between 2016 and 2017 from 144 to 199. The increase contributed to a record death toll from drug overdoses in the county—380 people or more than one a day.

The massive death toll is a national public health emergency on a scale not seen since the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s. According to new CDC data, in 2017 drug overdose deaths in the US topped 72,000, which is 6,000 more than in 2016, a rise of 9.5 percent. Nearly 30,000 deaths involved opioids, an increase of more than 9,000 (nearly 50 percent) from previous year.

The number of people directly impacted by the crisis—including family members, friends and colleagues, medical responders, social workers and many others—is in the millions.

The drug epidemic is the product of capitalism and the policies of the capitalist parties, both Democrats and Republicans. There is, first of all, the role of the pharmaceutical companies, which have amassed huge profits from the deceptive marketing of opioid pain killers, which they claimed were not addictive. Prescriptions for opioids such as Percocet, Oxycontin and Vicodin skyrocketed from 76 million in 1991 to nearly 259 million in 2012, enough to supply each American adult with a bottle of pills, and some with two.

The promotion of addictive pain killers was made possible by the immense need for such medication—one consequence of the conditions confronting American workers. A recent report found that many workers in dangerous jobs resorted to aggressive pain killers to allow them to continue working because they were afraid of the economic consequences of missed work.

Drug abuse and addiction, moreover, feeds on social distress and inequality. The regions most affected by the opioid epidemic include those that have been most devastated by deindustrialization, the destruction of

jobs, and the unrelenting attack on social programs, wages, public education and health care. This includes Downriver Michigan, which has been impacted by the destruction of auto and steel jobs over the past four decades.

Neither the Democrats nor Republicans have any intention of or capacity to address this crisis, for it is their bipartisan policy of social counter-revolution that has produced it. Trump is carrying out a war on the working class, handing billions of dollars to the corporate and financial elite. Yet he is only continuing the policies of his predecessor, Obama, who left office after ensuring the bailout of the banks and the greatest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in American history.

In response to the drug epidemic, Republican politicians and the Trump administration advocate a “law and order” approach, such as cracking down on low-level drug dealers and scapegoating immigrants. Some demand that individuals suffering from overdoses be denied life-saving treatment.

The Democratic Party is no less culpable. It is facilitating Trump’s attacks on workers while posturing here and there by proposing palliatives that leave untouched the underlying causes. My opponent in the 12th district, Debbie Dingell, has sponsored four such bills in congress aimed at an array of symptoms: safe disposal of unused drugs after a hospice patient’s death, sharing medical records between doctors, improving the over-the-counter monograph system, and calling for a paltry increase in funding for National Institutes of Health (NIH) research.

A drop in the ocean!

The socialist response to the opioid crisis, and drug abuse more generally, is based on the abolition of its causes.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that billions of dollars must be allocated to fund rehabilitation centers, using the most advanced scientific methods and procedures. The health care system must be equipped with detox centers and connected to institutions to help with long-term recovery. All social workers in the field must receive an immediate 50 percent wage increase, along with the counseling and support needed. Children must be given the highest level of care while their parents recover.

Profit must be taken out of health care, which is a

social right that must be guaranteed to everyone. The giant pharmaceutical companies must be transformed into publicly-owned utilities. The health insurance industry must be abolished and replaced with universal, socialized medicine.

Such elementary measures and more must be connected to the reconstruction of society to ensure that everyone has the right to a high-paying job, health care, education and quality housing, and that workers have access to leisure, art and culture. Cities devastated by deindustrialization must be rebuilt through a multi-trillion-dollar public works program.

The resources to pay for these necessary measures must come from the expropriation of the wealth of the corporate and financial elite, the parasites on society, who have amassed unimaginable fortunes through the exploitation and immiseration of the vast majority. As tens of thousands die, the ruling class conspires to spend trillions on war and conjure up new ways to increase its wealth.

These measures are component parts of the socialist transformation of American and world society. All the major banks and corporations must be placed under the democratic control of the population, to meet social needs and the rights of the working class, not private profit.

The disease of which the drug epidemic is a symptom is capitalism. It can be cured only through the mobilization of the entire working class, independently of the Democrats and Republicans, in a revolutionary movement to abolish inequality, war and the capitalist profit system.

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