

High cost of health care, lack of paid time off, leave US workers vulnerable to coronavirus outbreak

Jerry White
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With officials acknowledging that two people who died last week were infected by coronavirus COVID-19, the official number of deaths in the United States has reached nine, with all of the fatalities in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, Washington. There are now more than 115 known cases of coronavirus in at least a dozen US states. Internationally the number of known cases is approaching 100,000 with at least 3,000 deaths.

The Trump administration, primarily concerned with the impact on the stock market, has sought to downplay the seriousness of the threat to public health. It is apparent, however, that American society is unprepared and ill-equipped to handle the spreading virus.

Like every other crisis, whether triggered by hurricanes, tornados or other natural disasters or the global financial crash of 2008, it is the working class which will be most impacted by the coronavirus. The lack of a basic social safety net in the US, high levels of poverty and the proliferation of low-paid and precarious employment have combined with the growth of the uninsured and underinsured population and inability of workers to take time off, even when sick, to create a perfect storm.

In workplaces, supervisors have given workers little, if any, instructions and it is clear no plans are in place. If schools were closed, like the one-month shutdown in Japan, workers have no idea who would care for their children or how they would afford it. With little or no paid leave, workers have no idea where their income would come from if they were furloughed. Tens of thousands of airline workers could face layoffs because of curtailed travel along with manufacturing workers if components from the global supply chain dry up.

Autoworkers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* in Detroit expressed particular concern about the danger. The pandemic started in Wuhan, a major manufacturing center, known as China's "Motor City."

"Management hasn't given us any instructions concerning the coronavirus," Michael, a young Fiat Chrysler worker at the Sterling Heights Assembly plant in suburban Detroit, told the WSW. "The last company notice we got was about highway construction, but that was just so we don't show up late for work.

"If the coronavirus hit this plant everyone would get it. We're supposed to wash our hands but the bathrooms in the plant are filthy and we're always fighting just to get soap in the dispenser," he said.

"If this virus got into the plant everyone would get sick," Anthony, a young Fiat Chrysler worker at the Jefferson plant in Detroit, said, "No one can take a day off when they are sick. It's insane. A fast food worker gets the virus and comes to work, and we have zero chance of not getting it.

"Hand sanitizers are good, but they can't solve the issue. It's like bringing cases of water to Flint when the underlying problem is that the water is full of lead. There are so many uninsured Americans that people won't even go to the doctors to find out if they have it because it costs too much. There was a joke around social media, which said if you want to find out if you have coronavirus cough on a rich person and see what their doctor tells them."

After decades of deindustrialization and wage-cutting aided and abetted by the unions, some 220,000 Detroiters, or one in three city residents, and half of the city's children live below the government's official poverty line. In Michigan, approximately 535,000 residents were uninsured in 2018, up by 25,000. Far more are underinsured, i.e., they are covered by employer-sponsored insurance plans but cannot afford the premiums, deductibles, co-pays and other out-of-pocket costs.

A 2019 survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 40 percent of Americans with employer-sponsored health coverage still had difficulty affording the health plan or treatment. Average deductibles for employer-sponsored single coverage tripled from \$584 in 2006 to \$1,655 in 2019, according to a separate Kaiser study.

How many residents would forgo a trip to the doctor, where the virus could be caught, because they could not afford it?

While government officials are telling people that the best way to prevent the spread of infection is to thoroughly wash their hands, last year Detroit water officials disconnected 23,500 residents because they could not afford to pay their bills. As of January 15, 9,500 of those were still without water, according to city records.

Last week, Michigan's Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, rejected an appeal by the American Civil Liberties Union and Detroit civic groups that she use emergency powers to halt the water shutoffs because of the threat to public health.

On Monday, Nikolai Vitti, the superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools Community District, sent a perfunctory email to teachers and support staff trying to allay concerns and fears of the potential impact on the 50,000-student school district. "Public health officials continue to advise that the risk to the public remains low," Vitti writes, before instructing workers and their families to "practice good hygiene habits," including "wash your hands for at least 20 seconds" and "stay home when you are sick."

One Detroit teacher commented, "The problem with teachers and students being told to wash their hands is that many schools do not have soap. This is widely known and was one of the reasons for the teacher sickouts in 2016. The lack of supplies has still not been resolved.

"We don't know which of our families do or do not have water. So, we have to anticipate that many of the students come to school without washing because their water was shut off. In school, we insist they wash their hands, but the water is poisoned with lead. So whatever advantages they get by getting rid of germs and virus, now we have to worry about their skin absorbing the lead through their skin, especially if they have abrasions or cuts.

"Parents are frequently working two or three jobs and they don't have sick leave or other paid time off and often send their children to school sick. Not all schools have school nurses. Even for those that do, if the nurses screen the child for fever or other illness, it is not guaranteed that the parent will be able to get off of work and pick them up. If there is a school with 500–1,000 students and you have one student who is infected with coronavirus, it has the potential to be spread to all the students and their families, and to grow exponentially. This is especially true in an impoverished city like Detroit where going to an urgent care center or hospital emergency room is not affordable or easily accessible."

In a February 29 article entitled, "If coronavirus sweeps America, blame our brutal work and healthcare culture," *Los Angeles Times* business columnist Michael Hiltzik noted when the H1N1 flu virus hit the US in 2009, an estimated 26 million residents were infected during its peak months. Of these, an estimated 8 million continued to go to work while they were sick. "By the following February, public health authorities reckoned that those carriers infected some 7 million co-workers," the *Times* wrote, adding, "The problem was especially acute in the private sector, where paid sick leave was relatively rare."

The phenomenon of working while sick is so common that US businesses have a term for it, "presenteeism." The primary concern expressed by corporate management is how illnesses or other physical ailments undermine workplace productivity.

A study by Pennsylvania State University cited *the Times* concluded, "Presenteeism—attending work while ill—among private sector employees without paid sick days may have extended the duration of the [2009 flu] outbreak."

A quarter of American workers have no right to sick leave, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Only 58 percent of service workers, less than half of those in the lowest 25 percent of the income range, and only three in 10 of those in the lowest 10 percent of wage earners have sick leave, the *Times* notes.

As opposed to other countries, where many workers receive *paid* sick leave, in the US time off is often unpaid. In Britain, "workers are entitled to sick pay of at least \$120 a week for up to seven months, at their employer's expense. In France, the government and employers together cover 90% of a worker's pay for up to 30 days of sick leave, 67% after that," the *Times* notes.

"In China, the epicenter of the developing outbreak, workers are guaranteed 60% to 100% of their salary for up to six months, depending on their seniority, and 40% to 60% for up to six years after that. Those liberal standards may have eased the pain for workers when authorities imposed stringent quarantines in Wuhan province, where the virus is thought to have originated."

The coronavirus emergency has revealed the entirely irrational character of the capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life to the relentless pursuit of profit by giant corporations and blocks society from marshaling its scientific, technological and human resources around the world to combat this threat to public health. This underscores the need for the socialist reorganization of society, based on human need, not profit.

"Big Pharma will protect their profits by any means necessary," a veteran Fiat Chrysler worker in Detroit declared. "All the countries should come together to tackle this. We need global healthcare."



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