

The response of the working class to the coronavirus pandemic

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The spread of the coronavirus in the United States is rapidly developing into a social and economic catastrophe. The extent of the impact, including the possibility for an enormous loss of life, will emerge in the coming weeks. Already, however, the virus has exposed the consequences of the criminal level of neglect on the part of the ruling elite.

Worldwide, the number of cases is now over 120,000, with a rapid growth in new infections in Italy, France, Spain, Germany and Iran. The number of deaths has increased to more than 4,200 people. The United States, however, may be the most severely affected, due to its extreme levels of social inequality and the deplorable state of social infrastructure.

The total number of cases in the US is now over 955, with at least 29 deaths. In New York City, fast becoming a center of the outbreak, new cases are “coming in so intensely,” according to Mayor Bill de Blasio, that the city is unable to provide accurate information. The number of confirmed cases is at 36, with 173 in the state as a whole.

Los Angeles, California reported on Tuesday its first case of coronavirus from community transmission, with the total number in the city rising to 19. Massachusetts announced 51 new cases, bringing the total in that state up to 92. Seventy of these are related to one conference in Boston, meaning that the spread of the virus in the state’s largest city is likely far more extensive.

Six weeks after the first reported case in the US, the level of testing remains criminally uncoordinated. In areas of the country where there are no reported cases of the virus, this is more an indication of the complete absence of testing and health care infrastructure than an absence of the disease itself.

In New Rochelle, New York, a suburb outside of Manhattan, the initial reported case of coronavirus came on March 2. However, this individual had been in a hospital for four days before being tested. The number of infected in the suburb is now 90, the largest concentration on the East Coast. CNN reported yesterday that firefighters in Kirkland, Washington were tested for the virus after responding to an outbreak, but the backlog was such that their samples expired before they were processed.

The entire ruling class and its state are responsible for the chaotic response to the spread of the virus.

For decades, the American ruling class, under both Democrats and Republicans, has pursued policies that have redistributed wealth from the working class to the rich, while social infrastructure has been gutted. As a result, American society lacks

the social antibodies necessary to combat the epidemic. The conditions of masses of people—poverty, homelessness, lack of access to health care, low-wage work, economic insecurity—leave them immensely vulnerable.

Health and health care

Nearly half of US adults are uninsured or underinsured, meaning that they lack health care coverage entirely or their coverage is so costly that it is prohibitive to use. Over the past decade, and in particular since the implementation of Obamacare, health care has been even further restructured on a class basis, with separate facilities and services established to serve the wealthy and upper-middle class (so-called “concierge” health care).

The United States has only 2.8 hospital beds per 1,000 people (compared to South Korea and Japan, which have more than 12 beds per 1,000, and China, which has 4.3 beds per 1,000). This means that in the event of a major spread of the virus, which now appears inevitable, available beds will quickly run out.

As a direct result of poverty and lack of health care, millions of Americans suffer from underlying conditions that exacerbate the effect of coronavirus. Ten percent of the population, or 34 million people, have diabetes. Nearly half of all adult Americans have some form of cardiovascular disease, and more than 25 million people have asthma, the prevalence of which has risen rapidly over the past four decades.

Jobs and workplaces

Virtually nothing has been done to ensure safe workplaces. What happens when the coronavirus infects a worker at a major Amazon fulfillment center or an auto plant? There currently exist no protections for workers against the spread of the disease.

Only 30 percent of lower-wage workers have any access to paid sick leave, meaning that they are forced to choose between working while they are sick or not having enough income to pay for food, housing and other necessities. Moreover, as the

coronavirus spreads, more businesses will close their doors, leaving workers without income and further restricting their access to health care.

Schools

Several school districts have already closed, including one in suburban Seattle—a center of the outbreak in the United States—with 23,000 students. As a result, many parents must stay home from work with no paid leave or else find assistance. School closures will also have immense consequences for students who rely on free or reduced-price meals. More than 20 million students throughout the US qualify for federal food assistance programs administered through schools.

Homelessness

Half a million people are homeless in the United States on any given night, living in unsanitary or crowded conditions, either on the street or in homeless shelters. Those who are homeless are also more likely to have underlying health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the disease. Absolutely nothing has been done to address the problems facing homeless communities, including in California, a center of the outbreak where there are more than 150,000 homeless individuals.

These are only a few examples of the way in which the virus will affect millions of workers. What happens when the coronavirus begins to spread among US prisons, in which more than 2 million people are incarcerated? Or the cramped immigration detention centers and concentration camps set up along the US-Mexico border?

No expense can be spared when it comes to reducing the number of infections and saving lives. The working class must demand that governments and employers take emergency action to address the crisis:

- **Accessible and universal testing!** No expense can be spared in making available free testing to all those who show symptoms.
- **Free high-quality treatment and equality of care!** The most advanced medical care must be made available to everyone, regardless of income or insurance coverage.
- **Paid sick leave for all workers!** No one must be forced to work if they are sick, endangering themselves and others.
- **Protect refugees, prisoners and the homeless!** Everyone must have access to high-quality and clean living conditions to prevent the spread of the disease.
- **Safe working conditions!** All workers must have a safe work environment and be protected against the spread of the virus. Where there is a danger, workplaces and schools must be closed. Workers out of work must receive their full income, and all resources must be made available to those affected by school

closures, including paid time off and food assistance.

The working class cannot remain passive as this crisis develops. It must organize and fight for its interests. As the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote in its statement of February 28, 2020:

In demanding that capitalist governments implement these emergency measures, the international working class does not abandon its fundamental aim: the ending of the capitalist system. Rather, the fight for emergency action will raise the consciousness of the working class, develop its understanding of the need for international class solidarity, and increase its political self-confidence.

The SEP urges workers to form rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees to coordinate their activities, mobilize their collective strength, ensure that those who are sick receive social support, and monitor working conditions to enforce a safe environment.

The response to the disease cannot be left to the capitalist politicians, Democrats or Republican. Their primary concern is to maintain the profits of the ruling elite through the inflation of the stock market. The proposal yesterday from the Trump administration to cut payroll taxes as an “economic stimulus” will not only fail to address the spread of the disease, it will be utilized as an opportunity to demand cuts in Social Security and other social programs.

The ruling elites operate by the principle: Never let a crisis go to waste! In Italy, the state has deployed the military and police to enforce curfews, travel restrictions and bans on public gatherings. Similar measures have been adopted in France, and on Tuesday the governor of New York announced the deployment of the national guard to some areas of outbreak. The armed forces of the state will inevitably be targeted against any manifestation of social opposition, including mass unrest produced by the coronavirus.

The Socialist Equality Party and our election campaign are spearheading the fight to unify and organize the working class, to provide it with a political voice and program. We insist that the principle that must guide the response to the coronavirus outbreak and all social problems is social need, not private profit. The restructuring of the world economy on a socialist basis is an urgent matter of life and death.



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