

How to fight the COVID-19 pandemic: A program of action for the working class

The National Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (US)
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The COVID-19 pandemic is a global disaster. In just three months, the coronavirus, since its initial detection in China, has spread across the planet. This virus combines a high rate of infection with a substantial lethality. It is wreaking havoc throughout Europe and North America, where every day brings reports of thousands more confirmed infections. The number of dead is rising rapidly. The virus is now appearing in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

The scale and impact of the pandemic have been intensified by the indifference and criminal negligence of capitalist governments, which have wasted precious time. At his press conference on Monday, US President Donald Trump, while heaping praise on his own leadership, stated repeatedly that the coronavirus pandemic had come as a complete surprise. “We have a problem that a month ago nobody ever thought about,” Trump claimed. “This came out of nowhere.” This is a lie. Scientists have warned of the danger of a global pandemic for years. The world already has the experience of the SARS coronavirus of 2002-2003 and the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic of 2009-2010.

The World Economic Forum has repeatedly ranked infectious diseases as one of its top 10 global risks. Its last report on security and related capabilities in 195 countries found that no country was prepared for an epidemic or pandemic. It wrote that “our collective vulnerability to the societal and economic impacts of infectious disease crises appears to be increasing.” This warning was ignored.

Scientific studies show that an effective response to a pandemic demands rapid implementation of mass testing to slow its spread. However, even as the outbreak in China left no doubt about the scale of the danger, no effort was undertaken in Europe or the United States to detect the illness and stop its spread. But even if the government had wanted to initiate mass testing, the necessary kits hardly were to be found in the United States.

The major centers of world capitalism, above all the United States, have proven so completely incapable of responding to this crisis as a direct consequence of the destruction of social infrastructure over the past half-century. All considerations of social planning have been subordinated to raising share values on Wall Street and facilitating the accumulation of staggering levels of wealth by the ruling elites.

The health care system in the United States has been starved of resources. At the same time, trillions of dollars have been expended on armaments as the world powers prepare for global conflict. The annual US military budget is approximately \$1 trillion a year, with more spent every week on preparing for war than the entire coronavirus “relief” bill passed by the US House of Representatives this week.

The response of governments to the coronavirus pandemic is driven by precisely the same considerations. Resources have been directed not at halting the spread of the epidemic, but rather at protecting the rich.

What is involved is not just incompetence and disorganization. There is certainly that. However, behind all the chaos, confusion and lack of coordination, a deliberate policy is clear—a policy of malign neglect and

willful inaction. The motto of the ruling class is that which has guided it for decades: “If the accumulation of our billions requires the death of millions, so be it.”

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed the indifference of the ruling class this past week, when he declared: “I must level with the British public, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.” Behind closed doors, the representatives of the ruling elite are discussing what they consider the positive impact of the crisis: That the death of millions of older people will reduce long term health care costs.

In all the statements made by the various presidents and prime ministers, there is absolutely no concern expressed for masses of workers whose lives are being upended by the pandemic. In his press conference on Monday, Trump released new guidelines on quarantining and “social distancing.” However, nothing is being proposed to deal with the enormous financial impact that the loss of work is having on families.

At the same time, as states begin to implement restrictions on large gatherings, nothing is being said about the fact that millions of workers in manufacturing and service industries are being left on the job, expected to work in unsafe conditions in which they can become infected and can infect others.

The response of the Trump administration is dictated entirely by the profit interests of the giant corporations. Indeed, its policy has been to turn over management of the crisis to the corporations that are responsible for the disastrous state of social and health care infrastructure in the country. Last week, Trump paraded the CEOs of Walmart and the giant health care conglomerates before the American people as if they were national heroes. Meanwhile, millions of people remain unable to get tests even if they have symptoms.

The Trump administration is also seeking to ensure that any vaccine that is developed is controlled by American corporations so that they can profit off its distribution. Nothing could so clearly expose the criminal character of the American health care industry.

For the past two months, all of the White House’s actions in response to the pandemic have been aimed solely at propping up the financial markets. The US Federal Reserve and Treasury Department have turned over trillions of dollars to Wall Street through new “quantitative easing” programs and the reduction of interest rates for banks to zero.

An enormous amount of time has been lost, but the impact and extent of the pandemic depends on urgent responses that can be taken now. These measures must be centered on two absolutely critical priorities: First, to contain the spread of the virus as much as possible, and second, given that it has already acquired global dimensions, to provide emergency care for all who are ill and emergency assistance to all who are affected.

The essential principle that must guide the response to the crisis is that the needs of working people must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth. It is not a matter of what the ruling class claims it can afford, but what masses of people need.

The Socialist Equality Party advances the following demands. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it includes the fundamental foundation upon which a fight must be waged.

Accessible and universal testing and free treatment for all infected: The absence of a coordinated system to test those who may have the disease makes any rational response impossible. It is essential that testing be made available immediately throughout the United States and the entire world.

The treatment of all those infected is an urgent necessity not only for the ill, but also to stop the spread of the disease. Care must be given at no cost, regardless of insurance coverage or income.

An emergency program to expand health care infrastructure: The overwhelming of hospitals not only leads to a sharp increase in the death toll from the coronavirus, as has happened in Italy, it also means that those suffering from other diseases and injuries are unable to receive care. The lack of adequate equipment and health care infrastructure means that doctors are already being forced to choose who among their patients will live and who will die.

To combat the pandemic, it is necessary to massively expand facilities that treat the ill. The Trump administration is talking about setting up tents as medical units in Walmart parking lots. Such ramshackle facilities, in which masses of people are treated in primitive conditions, will only exacerbate the problem. China was able to construct new hospitals in only 10 days, which had an enormous impact on the extent and impact of the virus.

The construction of new medical facilities must begin immediately throughout the United States. This process can be vastly accelerated by taking over office buildings and similar structures, many of which are now empty, and rapidly converting them into hospitals and clinics. These structures can also be used to provide emergency housing for the homeless and for students who are being forced to leave college dormitories.

The representatives of the ruling class will inevitably claim that this is a violation of private property. Our response is that social needs must take priority over the wealth and profit of the ruling class.

The immediate closure of all schools, non-essential plants and other workplaces, with full income for workers affected: No worker should be expected to place his or her life in danger. Already, workers are closing restaurants and other businesses. This must be extended. However, all those who are losing their jobs or are otherwise affected by the economic fallout must be compensated.

To those who claim that there is no money, we say that a government that can make \$1.5 trillion appear from a hat to bail out Wall Street can find the resources. The fact that corporations are telling workers to continue to work for no purpose other than to pump out profit is nothing less than criminal.

The auto and other manufacturing companies in the US have ordered their management, along with the trade union executives, to go home, but they are insisting that workers stay on the line. Workers in Spain, Italy, Canada, the UK and the United States have already initiated walkouts and strikes to oppose their unnecessary exposure to danger. Workers are profoundly aware of the dangerous position in which they are placed.

Workers must be warned that the corporations will exploit the "opportunity" provided by the crisis to restructure their operations to make them more profitable. Workers laid off must receive full pay, financed by the corporations and state resources. All workers must have access to paid sick leave. Rent, mortgage and utility payments must be suspended during the coronavirus crisis to ensure that any worker seeing a reduction in income is able to afford basic necessities.

Safe working conditions in essential industries: Where work must continue, such as in the health care industry, transportation, food production and other sectors essential to the functioning of society, measures must be implemented to ensure the safety of workers and

guarantee that their rights are preserved. Every work location must be staffed with trained health care professionals, with workers provided with necessary equipment, including protective clothing, masks and gloves.

End all sanctions and trade war measures: The response of Iran, Venezuela and other countries is being crippled by economic sanctions that prevent them from acquiring basic medical equipment. Trade war measures implemented by the United States and European countries must be halted. The coronavirus is a global disease that requires a globally coordinated response.

All claims that there are no resources to implement such an emergency program are beneath contempt. It is not a question of whether the resources exist, but who controls these resources and how they are allocated. Corporate profits in the US are over \$2 trillion every quarter. The wealth of the richest 400 individuals in the United States is more than \$4 trillion. The massive sums allocated to the military must be redirected to meet social need, including the construction of health care infrastructure.

To the extent that private property gets in the way of emergency measures, it must be swept aside. All industries that are being bailed out by the government must instead be converted into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class, redirected toward the production of critical necessities.

If a war had broken out, economic life would be restructured by the ruling elites to produce the instruments of death. Now it is a matter of producing the instruments of life.

Two irreconcilable interests of two classes stand opposed to each other. For the capitalists, it is a question of securing their profit interests and ensuring that their property and wealth remain untouched. No measures are to be taken that impinge on their interests. The working class is concerned with the interests of the broad mass of humanity, proceeding not from private profit but from social need.

We raise these demands in order to mobilize workers, raise their class consciousness, develop their understanding of the need for international class solidarity and increase their political self-confidence. We place no confidence in any capitalist government to combat the pandemic, and we fully expect them to resist these demands. What can or cannot be achieved will be determined in struggle.

To take this fight forward, workers require their own organizations. The trade unions, beholden to the corporations and the state, will do nothing. Therefore, workers should form rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees to ensure safe working conditions, demand the shutdown of non-essential production, and ensure the safety and well-being of those who are ill or forced to quarantine.

Auto workers in Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan have already carried out work stoppages to demand the shutdown of auto plants.

Workers can and must utilize the technologies at their disposal to share information and organize to fight for their interests on an international scale. Even under conditions of quarantine and the shutdown of large sections of the economy, there exist innumerable forms of digital communication that allow workers to share information and organize throughout the country and around the world.

Even as they demand an urgent and immediate expansion of testing and medical resources, workers must also be on guard against efforts to use the crisis to implement long-planned efforts to build up the powers of the state. The danger is that capitalist governments will utilize emergency conditions to make bans on demonstrations and social protests permanent, enforced through the deployment of police forces and the military and the legitimization of dictatorial forms of rule.

The demands that workers raise are not separate from, but rather connected to the fight for the transformation of social and economic life. The vast technological and scientific advances and the enormous productive forces of humanity must be freed from the constraints placed

on them by the profit motive and the nation-state system.

The present crisis demonstrates again the failure of the capitalist system to meet the needs of modern society and the necessity for socialism. For the second time in little more than a decade, the entire world economy is on the verge of a collapse and meltdown. And climate change threatens to make much of the world uninhabitable.

The pandemic has also exposed the bankruptcy of the entire political system. The Trump administration is a government of the oligarchy. Its fascistic attacks on immigrants and refugees and its promotion of nationalism and xenophobia—part of an international growth of the far-right—stand in fundamental conflict with the needs of global mass society. As for the Democratic Party, it has for the past three years sought to focus opposition to Trump on the lie that the greatest threat to the American people comes from Russia.

This crisis is unfolding in an election year. In the months to come, the Socialist Equality Party and our candidates, Joseph Kishore for president and Norissa Santa Cruz for vice president, will place the fight to mobilize the working class to demand serious action to stop the pandemic at the forefront of our campaign. The SEP advances this program because it is the only organization that bases itself on a genuinely socialist, internationalist and revolutionary perspective.

We call on all workers and young people to join this campaign and support this fight. The building of an international socialist and revolutionary movement is the central question of our time. It is a matter of life and death.

To support and get involved in the SEP election campaign, visit socialism2020.org.



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