Trump's "Get back to work" demagogy aids the spread of the pandemic

Joseph Kishore
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The coronavirus pandemic continues to spread throughout the world. The total death toll globally is over 22,000. On Thursday, there were more than 6,000 new cases and 712 new deaths reported in Italy; 6,600 new cases and 500 new deaths in Spain; and 6,000 new cases and 56 deaths in Germany. The virus is only beginning to spread in Indonesia, Brazil, India and other countries in Asia and Latin America.

The center of the accelerating pandemic is the United States. It has now surpassed Italy and China with the largest number of confirmed cases, at more than 85,000. The US counted 17,000 new cases yesterday, almost three times that of any other country. The death toll has surged to nearly 1,300.

Amidst this escalating crisis, the Trump administration is intensifying its efforts to promote a speedy return to work.

"We have to get back to work," Trump declared at his Thursday press conference. "Our people want to work, they want to go back, they have to go back… This is a country that was built on getting it done, and our people want to go back to work. I am hearing it loud and clear from everybody."

In Trump's imaginary world, "everybody" refers, first and foremost, to himself, and then to a slew of corporate executives who want to have workers back on the job and churning out profit, regardless of the impact on the public's health.

Trump continued, as if lost in some sort of strange reverie, "They have to go back to work. Our country has to go back. Our country is based on that. And I think it is going to happen pretty quickly…"

Earlier in the day, the administration sent a letter to state governors announcing that it will be updating its guidelines early next week on "social distancing" to press for a relaxation of measures that have shut down non-essential production in many states throughout the country.

The demands of the Trump administration contradict recommendations from all epidemiologists and health care professionals. Yonatan Grad, an assistant professor of immunology and infectious disease at Harvard University told *Medscape* this week that "social distancing is really the key thing that we can do right now." He continued, "A too hasty retreat from social distancing risks a threat to our health care infrastructure, which itself carries huge economic consequences."

Larry Gostin, a professor of global health law at Georgetown University, noted that it "would be utterly irresponsible to urge people to go back to work and normal social life. All the evidence suggests that if governments lift physical distancing too soon, it will cause a major resurgence of cases and deaths."

To justify a back to work order, Trump piled one lie upon another. He claimed that "testing is going very well," declaring that the US has tested far more people than South Korea, which the administration had previously criticized for testing too much. In fact, there have been only 500,000 tests in the United States, less than one in 650 people, a ratio far below that of South Korea. In California, a center of the outbreak, only one in 2,000 people has been tested.

Deborah Birx, head of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, acknowledged at the press conference that the US is still not testing people who do not have severe symptoms, meaning the vast majority of those who have the virus are not being tested. Doctors are still reporting shortages of tests throughout the country.

Moreover, by testing aggressively, South Korea was able to control the spread of the virus at a relatively early stage. In the United States, there was virtually no

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testing for months, allowing the virus to spread throughout the country.

In an effort to minimize the seriousness of the pandemic, Trump declared that "the mortality rate, in my opinion is way, way down." This is under conditions where New York City, which accounts for 30 percent of all cases in the US, is constructing makeshift morgues to deal with the spike in deaths. In New Orleans, which is now experiencing the fastest growth of new cases in the world, hospitals are running out of supplies and room. Amidst a nationwide shortage of basic equipment, hospitals are already discussing policies for determining who will live and who will die.

Then there is the lie that workers "want to go back." In fact, production has been shut down in some industries due to wildcat strikes and sickouts of autoworkers, sanitation workers, shipbuilders, transit workers, poultry workers and Amazon workers.

In recent days, top Wall Street executives, along with the editorial page of the *New York Times*, affiliated with the Democratic Party, have insisted that a quick return to work is necessary, under the slogan "the cure cannot be worse than the disease."

There is a definite class logic to these demands. On Thursday, on the same day as a report showing new unemployment claims soared to 3.3. million, nearly five times more than the previous peaks in 1982 and 2009, the Dow Jones Industrial Average increased by more than 6 percent. The US financial markets are up nearly 23 percent from their lows at the beginning of the week.

In response to a question that noted the record rise in the market, Trump said on Thursday: "They think that we are doing a really good job at running this whole situation having to do with the virus. I think they feel that the administration, myself and the administration, are doing a really good job."

The "good job" that Wall Street is celebrating is the imminent passage, on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis, of the grossly misnamed "CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act." Trump thanked Democrats and Republicans in the Senate "for unanimously passing the largest financial relief passage in American history." Among those participating in this unanimous vote was Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said yesterday that she expects a "strong bipartisan vote" for the bill sometime today, after which it will go to the White House to be signed into law.

The most significant component of the $2 trillion bill is $425 billion from the US Treasury Department to back $4 trillion or more in asset purchases by the Federal Reserve, which is expected to more than double its current balance sheet to $10 trillion. These programs, announced over the past two weeks, include the purchase of bank assets as well as, for the first time ever, the direct buying up of corporate debt. The programs will be overseen by BlackRock, the largest asset manager in the world.

In essence, Congress is giving the Federal Reserve the authority to provide unlimited sums of cash directly to the banks and giant corporations. In the final analysis, these payouts have to be paid for through the exploitation of labor and the extraction of profit. The ruling class intends to compel workers to return to work under unsafe conditions through economic blackmail and, if necessary, outright force. The police and the military stand ready to enforce labor discipline.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep class divisions in the United States. For the Trump administration and the ruling class, "winning the war" against the pandemic means, above all, restoring the best conditions for the intensified exploitation of the working class. But for the working class, the success of the fight to contain the spread of the coronavirus is measured in lives saved, not profits made.

This is an irreconcilable conflict. The determination of the ruling elite to deal with the pandemic without undermining the capitalist profit system leads to authoritarianism and war. The efforts of the working class to combat the pandemic lead to socialism.

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