

The working class, socialism and the fight against the pandemic

David North
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An audio recording of this Perspective by the author, David North, is available in today's WSWWS podcast.

In the *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky described the sit-down strikes that erupted in the United States in 1936-37, in the midst of the Great Depression, as the expression of “the instinctive striving of the American workers to raise themselves to the level of the tasks imposed on them by history.”

This insight of the great twentieth century strategist of international socialism provides a historically grounded framework for understanding the significance of the eruption of wildcat strikes and protests by Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods workers. There have also been reports of protests by General Electric workers in Massachusetts and Kentucky, Perdue workers in Georgia and nurses in San Francisco. All of these actions have been in response to the criminal subordination of workers' safety to corporate profits.

The characteristic of every great crisis is that it lays bare the contradictions that have accumulated and been suppressed for decades. All that is backward, anachronistic, corrupt, and, in the most profoundly objective sense, absurd and even irrational in the economic organization, social structure, political leadership and dominant ideology of the existing society is brutally and comprehensively exposed.

That which was glorified is suddenly despised. The heroes whose achievements were lauded become objects of universal contempt. The sight of those who represent, or are seen to be apologists for the ruling establishment, evokes among masses of people a feeling of indignation, anger and disgust.

The pandemic is such a crisis. In a matter of just a few weeks, it has discredited in the eyes of millions the existing social, political and economic order. The United States, by far the richest country in the world, with the largest banks and corporations, and the home of the greatest number of billionaires, has proven incapable of organizing anything resembling an effective response to the disease.

There existed no plan to slow and stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The danger of a lethal pandemic has been the subject of numerous medical studies and government reports for the past two decades. These warnings were downplayed and ignored. For an economic and political system whose primary objective has been the enrichment of a parasitic oligarchy, the diversion of financial resources to areas of research and production

that did not generate high levels of profit was seen as a waste of time and money.

The result of reactionary social policy is now seen in the expanding landscape of death, as the pandemic spreads through New York, Boston, Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans and Los Angeles. No state or major city can expect to be spared. The rural areas, which will not escape the pandemic, lack in many cases even the most rudimentary facilities to cope with mass infections.

The United States, which spends hundreds of billions on the most advanced weapons systems for its multiple wars in one or another part of the world, cannot provide its hospitals with ventilators or its health care workers with face masks and other protective gear. The tests that are required to track and counteract the virus are not available. Countless thousands who complain of symptoms associated with the coronavirus are unable to know for sure whether or not they are infected.

Doctors, nurses and all those who provide essential support to patients labor 15 to 18 hours a day and are themselves in constant danger of contracting the disease. The hospital beds required for the sick who are desperately in need of treatment do not exist. The morgues are overcrowded. Even the dead are denied the dignity to which they are entitled.

The crisis has exposed the irreconcilably opposed interests that are embedded in American society. There is no greater lie than “We (i.e., capitalists and workers) are all in this together.” No, “We” certainly are not! The ruling corporate-financial elite and the working class experience this crisis in profoundly different ways, and their concerns and priorities are worlds apart.

From the beginning, the major concern of the corporate-financial elite and its political flunkies in the Democratic and Republican parties has been to protect its wealth, and the capitalist profit system upon which it is based, from the economic fallout of the pandemic. It was not the rate of infection and the rising death toll that roused the Trump administration and Congress to action, but the sudden and massive fall of share values on Wall Street.

As in 2008, but now on an even greater scale, the ruling class demanded the immediate infusion of trillions of dollars into the financial markets and the coffers of the corporations. The words that are always used to deny wage increases for workers and to justify massive spending cuts for essential social services—“There is no money”—were not to be heard in the halls of Congress. It voted to place unlimited sums of money at the disposal of the banks and corporations, without any significant restrictions or

oversight on the use of the funds. Most important of all, the six-trillion-dollar bailout—the second such rescue operation within little more than a decade—was implemented without encroaching to even the smallest degree on capitalist property and wealth. As for the overwhelming majority of the population, the amount of money devoted to its needs amounted to an insignificant fraction of the congressional rescue package.

The ruling class breathed a sigh of relief. Once the bailout had been voted on, the Wall Street casino was soon back in operation and share values rose, within days, by 20 percent. But the trillions forked over by the bipartisan Congress—a show of unity in which Senator Bernie Sanders duly participated—intensified the underlying economic crisis spawned by decades of capitalist parasitism associated with the process of financialization—that is, the ever greater separation of money creation from the actual process of production. However vehemently bourgeois economists deny the Marxist labor theory of value, no capitalist economy can survive without the expenditure of the labor power of the working class. As Marx succinctly noted, “Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish.”

And so, the demand for a rapid return to work was soon being advanced. The new phrase of the hour was: “The cure for the pandemic cannot be worse than the disease.” Ignoring the explicit warnings of experts on the pandemic, Trump declared that the workers should be back on the job within two weeks. The fact that this reckless decision would, if implemented, cost hundreds of thousands of lives was a matter of indifference to Trump.

But it is on precisely this issue that the profound and irreconcilable conflict between the interests and objectives of the capitalist class and those of the working class have exploded into the open.

The capitalist demand—endorsed by substantial sections of the media—for a premature and dangerous resumption of work is totally opposed to the insistence of the working class that the pandemic be suppressed by stopping unessential production and strictly observing safety procedures to protect workers whose labor *is* essential, in both their interests and those of the public they serve. Even though the Trump administration has now—in the face of an exponential increase in the rate of infections and a rapidly rising death toll—retreated from its call for an early return to work, corporate interests are still depriving workers who provide essential services of the safe conditions upon which their very lives depend.

The walkout and protest actions of the Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods workers and other sections of the working class reveal not only the class polarization in society. They are an initial expression of the growing efforts of the working class to advance a progressive solution to this crisis, a solution that proceeds from the objective needs of humanity as a whole.

There is no question that the actions of the Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods workers are supported by the great mass of the working class. To mobilize and organize this support, we urge workers to form rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles and build the greatest possible unity among all sections of the working class.

Industrial action requires a new political orientation. It is necessary to break with the capitalist Republican-Democratic two-party system, which is totally beholden to the capitalist class. It is vital that this movement, which insists on the absolute priority of life over profits, acquire a politically conscious, that is, socialist direction. The fight against the pandemic is inseparably bound up with the struggle of the working class against capitalism.

Toward this end, the Socialist Equality Party advances the following demands:

- Repeal of the corporate-Wall Street bailout and the immediate redirection of financial and industrial resources toward fighting the pandemic and providing all health care, service and industrial workers with all necessary equipment to serve those stricken with the virus and society as a whole in a safe environment.
- Take the profit out of medical services. Nationalize the entire health care and pharmaceutical industry without compensation to large shareholders and executives, and place it under the democratic control of workers, scientists and researchers.
- Nationalize Amazon and other vital service industries.
- No reduction or loss of pay for workers who are laid off or have their hours reduced, for the duration of the pandemic.
- Initiate global collaboration of scientists and researchers in a world-wide fight against the pandemic. End spending for war and invest trillions in fighting disease, global warming and other existential threats to life on this planet.

In advancing this program, we state openly that its realization is bound up with the transfer of political power to the working class, supported by all progressive forces in society.

This statement is focused on developments in the United States. But the pandemic is a global crisis and the same social and political issues are raised in every country. All countries—and many with resources that are but a fraction of those available to the United States—are experiencing the tragedy of this pandemic. That is why the fight against the pandemic requires the unity of the working class on a world scale. There is no place for national chauvinism and great-power politics in this struggle.

A century ago, in the midst of the First World War, the revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg said that the alternatives that confronted mankind were socialism or barbarism.

Today, the alternatives present themselves as the capitalist profit system and death, or socialism and life.

We appeal to all those who recognize the necessity of this fight for workers’ power and socialism to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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