

Trump's campaign to reopen businesses risks hundreds of thousands of lives

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party
11 April 2020

On Friday, the world passed a grim milestone of 100,000 deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. At more than 18,700, the United States now has more coronavirus deaths than any other country, surpassing Italy and Spain.

For the first time Friday, more than 2,000 people died in the United States. In New York, dozens of corpses are being interred each day in unmarked mass graves in a potter's field on Hart Island in the Bronx. Refrigerated trucks are stacked high with bodies outside the city's hospitals.

Sinai Grace Hospital in Detroit is running out of body bags. "All three coolers are filled," nurse Jeff Eichenlaub told the *Detroit News*. "The morgue and the viewing room next to the morgue are full, and right now we're taking bodies to the sleep lab to store them."

The virus is beginning to spread more rapidly in states beyond the initial centers, including in Massachusetts (2,033 new cases yesterday); Pennsylvania (1,795 new cases); Illinois (1,465 new cases) and Florida (1,142 new cases). It is beginning to move into rural areas, which in many cases lack any facilities to treat those who become ill.

However, in the course of this week, with nearly 2,000 new deaths every day, a disturbing turn in the media narrative began to take shape. While the week began with grim warnings of the disaster that would unfold, it came to an end with innumerable articles focused on the supposed "glimmers of hope" and the "light at the end of the tunnel."

This shift in the narrative is being used to justify demands for a premature return to work. The most open advocate is President Donald Trump, who has used his daily press briefings to advocate that the United States "open with a big bang."

Scientists in the United States and throughout the world have warned against any effort to prematurely open businesses and workplaces. On Friday, the *New York Times* reported that the Trump administration's own internal figures state that an early rollback of social distancing measures will lead to the deaths of approximately 140,000 people.

"If the administration lifts the 30-day stay-at-home orders, the death total is estimated to reach 200,000, even if schools remain closed until summer," the *Times* notes. This contrasts with the government's current estimates of 60,400 deaths if current restrictions are kept in place through the end of May.

There is not a single credible scientist, doctor or epidemiologist who claims that the pandemic is under control in the United States. Scientists have warned that the US lacks the necessary health infrastructure to contain the pandemic if social distancing measures are lifted. The United States is testing only those with the most severe symptoms, and there are no systematic quarantine and contact tracing measures in place in most of the country.

In fact, the Trump administration is moving to roll back testing, cutting federal funding to drive-through testing facilities this week, leading some of them to close.

What will a return to work mean? The aim of the Trump administration and the American ruling class as a whole is to "normalize" the pandemic, that is, to acclimate the population to the fact that large numbers of people will die for some time to come. Workers are supposed to accept it as something inevitable, with the death toll attracting less and less attention in the news.

There is a deeply sinister class logic at work in this demand. Workers are to be treated as expendable. If they die, this is just a cost of doing business, with those

who succumb to the disease replaced by others.

In practical terms, moreover, it means that workers who refuse to work risk being fired, making them ineligible for unemployment insurance. The mass joblessness—with 16.8 million filing for unemployment claims in just the last three weeks—will be used as a cudgel to force them to risk their lives by returning to the job. The corporations, which before the pandemic were facing a labor shortage, will once again have the whip in hand to discipline their workforce.

To the extent that the pandemic disproportionately kills the oldest and most vulnerable, this will mean that fewer social resources are diverted to caring for the elderly and infirm and can instead be used to fund share buybacks and dividend payments.

The demand for an early return to work is the continuation of the policy of “malign neglect” carried out by the ruling class since the start of the pandemic.

Trump initially downplayed the significance of the pandemic, presenting it as an external enemy to be combatted with travel bans. The United States made no serious effort to carry out testing for months. It was only after the horrific reports emerged, first from Italy, then in Washington and New York, that state governments and finally the White House were forced, amid popular pressures and spontaneous walkouts by workers, to implement widespread social distancing.

As the pandemic spread, the ruling class used the crisis atmosphere to implement—on a unanimously bipartisan basis—the largest transfer of wealth to the corporate and financial oligarchy in history. The bailout of Wall Street by the Treasury and the Federal Reserve, including an additional \$2.3 trillion program announced yesterday, far exceeds what was done after the 2008 crisis. This time it was orchestrated in a matter of days.

As this exercise in thievery and plunder on a mass scale was underway, the push for a return to work began almost immediately. And it was not just from the Trump administration. Indeed, the campaign was initiated by the Democratic Party-aligned *New York Times*, whose columnist Thomas Friedman warned against a “cure—even for a short while—worse than the disease.”

And what is happening in the United States is repeated throughout Western Europe. The Austrian government has announced plans to return to work as early as next week, while Spain intends to reopen auto

plants on April 20.

The Socialist Equality Party National Committee wrote in its statement of March 17: “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.”

The Socialist Equality Party insists there must be no return to work under unsafe conditions! In the wave of strikes that have emerged in every industry, the demands of workers for safe working conditions, the provision of protective equipment, and the closure of nonessential production have corresponded with the demands of scientists for measures to contain the pandemic.

All workers affected by the crisis must receive full income, and there must be an immediate cancellation of mortgage, debt and utility payments.

The COVID-19 pandemic can still be contained and eradicated through a massive investment in health care. Hundreds of thousands, or even millions of lives around the world can be saved!

The trillions handed out to Wall Street must be cancelled. Instead, a massive public works program must be initiated to build emergency health care infrastructure, produce lifesaving medical equipment, and create the systems for large-scale testing and contact tracing that are essential for stopping COVID-19.

The realization of these demands requires the conquest of political power by the working class, supported by all progressive forces in society, in the United States and every country. Social and economic life must be reorganized on the basis of social need, not private profit. The alternative confronting mankind is capitalism and death, or socialism and life.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact