

“This is what will bring the people into the streets ... this didn’t have to happen”

Interview with a retired Detroit school bus driver about the impact of COVID-19

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The working-class population in Detroit has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic with catastrophic consequences. The metropolitan area of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties now has 19,333 confirmed cases and 1,250 deaths. These numbers are 78 percent and 84 percent, respectively, of the entire state of Michigan.

People throughout the metropolitan area and especially within Detroit itself—where there are now 3,602 confirmed cases and 368 deaths from COVID-19—both know people who are close to them or have family members who have either been sick or have died from complications of coronavirus.

Detroit has been ravaged by decades of attacks on its health care and social infrastructure, combined with the deindustrialization that has destroyed tens of thousands of jobs in the automotive and related industries. Through the economic crisis of 2008 and the bankruptcy of the Detroit in 2014, the corporate and financial elite have stripped resources and driven large sections of the working-class population of the city into conditions of severe poverty.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Mary Coleman, a retired Detroit school bus driver, who spoke at length about the unfolding crisis and how it has impacted her family and former coworkers.

WSWS: Can you explain a little bit about how the pandemic has been affecting you personally?

Mary Coleman: I’ve been kind of really stressed out because, in the beginning of this coronavirus, I lost my favorite nephew. He lived in Georgia, and he was in the army. He was with the corps of engineers. He was the first person close to me who passed away, and it hit me pretty hard.

I didn’t find out about him even being sick until he had already passed away. His sister called me two hours after he died, and then his wife called me. They had a service for him a couple of weeks ago now.

Then people here close to home started to text me and telling me how many people were sick and how people got the coronavirus. Then you turn around, and they’re calling me back, saying they have passed away.

Most of the bus drivers that I worked with are retired. We have a Facebook page that the retirees go on. Every day somebody on there that worked at the bus yard or was a bus driver or was a bus attendant, they’ve passed away.

WSWS: How did you learn about what had happened to your former coworkers?

MC: Well, it has been hitting pretty hard for me and the bus drivers. We’ve had this Facebook page for a couple of years now, and we have a bus drivers reunion. So, we know when somebody retires, or we know when somebody dies or something like this.

So now it’s really like I don’t want to get up and look at my Facebook page because I don’t want to know. It’s so painful right now.

And you don’t know what to believe. There is so much information, and so many stories out here. People start sending you stuff on Facebook Messenger and telling you to do this and what not to do. Some of it is good advice, and some of it is not.

WSWS: How have the families of your friends been dealing with the situation as far as the social distancing requirements?

MC: One friend of mine, her sister passed away. They were going to have a service this Tuesday, but they’re taking them to the grave site. They can’t go inside the funeral home. The funeral home does have the body, but they will only let so many people in. So now, they’re taking them to the grave site, and you can come there as long as you stay six feet apart.

When someone dies like this, you can call and ask them if they need anything or if there is something you can do, but there really is nothing you can do. I don’t think even my parents’ generation has seen anything like this. You know, I was thinking they said there was a pandemic in 1968, but I can’t remember that.

These friends of mine were in their sixties, and my friend that died last Sunday was in her seventies. They were retirees that I worked with. One of my friends was 46 when she died. And one of my friends died, and then her daughter. She didn’t die from the virus; she had a massive heart attack because her mom died from the virus.

WSWS: Has the pandemic impacted your family in any other ways?

MC: My son and his wife live in Las Vegas, and both of them are on the front lines. She’s an RN, and she works for the Veterans Administration. My son is a physician’s assistant, and he runs a nursing facility. He calls me every day, sometimes twice a day. He tells me things that he can’t believe are going on because even they have not been able to be tested. In the facility where he works there are about four patients that have the virus.

The main question for me is: Where did this virus come from? I mean, everybody knows it started in China, but why can’t it be stopped? They can get ahead of the flu, but they can’t get ahead of this? All of these deaths, 20,000 people have died in the United States. This is horrible.

The government has been handling this lousy. My thing is that the government knew about this ahead of time, and they didn’t do anything. So now they are sitting back, and they’re still not doing anything about it. What they should be doing is getting more people tested. I think the doctors and the nurses should be able to be tested. I don’t think the government should be hoarding the stockpiles of PPE.

Like I was telling a friend of mine, we really need to march on

Washington and throw this administration out. Why do 20,000 people have to die? I can't even remember in a war that 20,000 people have died, right?

WSWS: What are your thoughts about the way it is impacting the population in Detroit?

MC: They say it is hitting African Americans very hard because of the conditions and the impact on areas they live in, with the minimum wage jobs and stuff like this. It is hard for somebody to survive and get the proper care. I don't know too many people who don't have underlying conditions.

I was reading this morning, where the government won't even let people reenroll for the Affordable Care Act. This is crazy. They let 1.5 million people get dropped from the ACA enrollment. This is unreal. And this is supposed to be the richest country in the world? This is not the America I want to know. This is worse than a Third World country, if you look at it.

This is not only in Detroit. It's everywhere. It's in Chicago. It's in the prisons. I am outraged; I am angry. I really am. I'm angry because more black people are in prison; more black people get low paying jobs.

I was looking at the Wayne County jail, where they said one person had the virus, and the inmates are protesting. They were telling us how the media is lying about what is happening in there. Then one guy is walking down the hall, bent over—a young black guy—sick and coughing and somebody had shot a video of it.

WSWS: Can you tell me more about the Detroit school bus drivers, your former coworkers?

MC: Well, Jerome Childs was a pastor, and he died. He was working with Trinity Transportation [service contracted by Detroit Public Schools], but I'm not sure. Jesse Gordon was one of my best friends. He was retired and died.

Pat Harris and Mary Branch, they were retired, and they both died. Lavonne Madison was also retired. As I was explaining, it was so devastating to Lavonne's daughter, because you can't go into the hospital and say goodbye to your loved one or to see how they are doing. It was so devastating for Lavonne's daughter when she got the call that her mother passed away. She didn't wake up when she went to lay down. That's actually grieving yourself to death.

It's just so painful, you know, to get up one morning and to see all of these people, who were in the hospital, die like that.

WSWS : What have you heard about the situation in the hospitals in Detroit?

MC: One of my friends called me about Sinai-Grace Hospital, about how people was lying on the floor where they came into the hospital. That's in Detroit. They're not lying on the floor out here in West Bloomfield. I actually know a doctor who lives near me, and he's working at Henry Ford Hospital downtown, and he works so hard. He doesn't do anything but go to work and come home. When you see him, he just shakes his head.

It's unreal what's happening to people. These are things that he's never seen before. He's a young resident doctor. He said it's devastating to see this, and you can't do anything about it. They don't have enough ventilators, and they're not putting the older people on ventilators.

So, they're using the ventilators with the people they think they can save, but they don't ask the families before they do that. They make that decision there. I think that's more devastating on the doctors and the nurses than anything.

WSWS: Did you hear about the nurse at Sinai-Grace who was fired for speaking out about the situation and demanding that something be done about it?

MC: Of course, they will fire anyone who speaks up against this. That comes from the Trump administration. This man will fire anybody who says anything against him.

He's right now making a difference between the states with Republican governors and the states with Democratic governors. I was reading this morning where Trump is favoring those who say nice things about him and giving them ventilators. This is wrong.

These are the things that are going on, and this government is wrong. This is what will bring the people into the streets. When this stuff all dies down, this is what's going to bring people to the streets.

WSWS: What do you think about how this is impacting the entire working class?

MC: This really affects the working class. It affects the poor and the working class. If you think about how it started off, nobody was getting the test except the athletes. And then somebody came out and asked why is it that all the NBA athletes of every team got a test? One of the journalists asked Donald Trump that question, and he said, "What do you think?"

The people who are getting sick are the poor and the working class people. The people working on the front lines. They're not thinking about them. Who is supposed to care for the doctors and the nurses and the people working in the stores, the people working on the trains and things like that? What about the people bringing in the supplies, the truck drivers? Who is thinking about them? These are the working class people.

As far as the rich people, they aren't thinking about anyone else because they can get on a plane and fly wherever they want to go.

WSWS: What are your thoughts about the Trump administration's plan to get everyone back to work?

MC: I think it's going to get worse before it gets better. Trump is telling everyone to go back to work so he can say, "Look what I did. I got the people back to work." He wants to brag, but it's still going to hurt a lot of people. He's looking at being reelected in November. He doesn't care; this man doesn't care. He's looking to get people back to work in these minimum wage jobs.

Once they start making the people go back to work, then that's when the people are going to get sick again. The second time around it's going to be worse.

I have never heard Donald Trump say anything about the homeless people. Many of those people who died in New York must have been homeless people because they are putting those people in unmarked graves where nobody came out and claimed them. This is horrible. They are being found dead on the street.

I contacted the city councilwoman, Brenda Jones, here in Detroit, and I asked her, I made a suggestion. We've got so many closed down schools that nobody is using. Why not refurbish them? They've got kitchens and bathrooms in them and rooms that can be made into bedrooms by the corps of engineers. Let's get the homeless people off the streets. She did not get back with me. It's really sad.

WSWS: What do you think will be the consequences of this crisis?

MC: I tell people if you're not angry, you should be. People dying on the street. This is unreal for me. They set up a testing facility at Woodward and 8 Mile Road, but you have to have a doctor's prescription to go. I called my doctor to see if she would give me one, but she said I needed to have the symptoms. Well, I asked my doctor, "What do you have to be, damned near dead?" She said, "Well, Mary, you would ask that question."

They said they predict 100,000 or over 100,000 people will die. They're not reporting it accurately. They're trying to keep the numbers down. I think they're not going to record everybody who died from this virus because we actually don't have the proper testing.

America is not as big as China, and we've got more deaths in the United States than anywhere else in the world. That's why they want to keep the numbers down because Donald Trump wants to make himself look good. People should be really upset about this because this didn't have to happen. Donald Trump knew about this virus in December, but he told the CDC not to talk about it. It is sad that people have to die because

somebody was so incompetent and did not do their job.



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