Navajo Nation institutes lockdown as COVID-19 cases climb

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On Friday, the Navajo Nation instituted a three-day total lockdown in an attempt to combat the spread of the coronavirus, as COVID-19 cases neared 600 and deaths climbed to 22. This move will likely do little to reduce the risk the pandemic poses to Native Americans, whose communities have historically been starved of resources by the US government, resulting in crushing poverty and severe health issues.

With conditions in the Navajo Nation already dire, the coronavirus crisis has pushed the limited health care system to the breaking point, overwhelming emergency rooms and causing many to die at home without being tested. The Navajo Nation faces a critical lack of ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE), and an overall lack of infrastructure to respond to an acute health crisis.

According to Dr. Nina Ritchie, as reported in *Lake Powell Life*, "There are only 28 ventilators on the entire reservation. We need at least double this amount… And that doesn't take into account the number of medical professionals needed to take care of these critically ill patients." Health workers, she added, "are continually getting exposed to the virus and being quarantined because they do not have enough [PPE]."

Though the CARES Act passed at the end of March will provide over $3.5 billion to tribes across the United States, doctors and tribal leaders are critical of the slow federal response. Dr. Ritchie cited concerns that the National Guard, which has set up field hospitals on Navajo land, has treated tribes with indifference.

A temporary hospital in Chinle was put in place far from any other hospital and provided no staff or medical supplies. Dr. Ritchie said the federal funding "will likely get here after the worse has already occurred." She added that "the money is not worth a whole lot when vendors are out of [medical supplies] and we can't find nurses and other staff to pay."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in 2017, health care for Native Americans has already been gutted in the interests of private profit. The Indian Health Services (IHS) has received only 30 to 50 percent of the funding required to maintain adequate services, staffing and programs. Under the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act, the chronic health issues plaguing Native Americans were not addressed. Rather than increasing funding for the IHS, the government directed tribal members to private insurance.

More than 175,000 people live in the semi-autonomous Navajo Nation, which spans 27,413 square miles spanning parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. According to *Al Jazeera*, there are in an area the size of West Virginia only 13 full-service supermarkets, one of which closed last week when an employee tested positive for COVID-19. Navajo authorities had already imposed a curfew, intensifying an already acute hunger crisis on tribal lands.

By restricting access to an already limited food supply among a population wracked by health issues stemming from social inequality, the coronavirus pandemic has the potential to decimate the Native American population. A 2007 Johns Hopkins University study on Navajo Nation food insecurity found that "Navajo households have the highest prevalence of food insecurity (76.7 percent) ever reported for a US population."

This staggering rate of hunger and malnutrition is the direct result of poverty and economic distress, stemming from US capitalism's centuries-long drive to eradicate the Native American population. So too are the pervasive health problems and the lack of health

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care infrastructure.

Doctors and workers cite the Navajo Nation's high-density housing projects, with multiple generations under one roof, as posing a particular danger of COVID-19 infection. A member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe told ABC News, "The apartment complexes are basically wall-to-wall, where you don't have that real social distancing… They were not built with the thought of a pandemic happening."

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) has sought to cover up its role in allowing the virus to spread. On March 16, as Arizona shuttered schools across the state, the BIE-run Rocky Ridge Boarding School remained open, busing students from many rural Navajo communities and allowing teachers to meet for days after the shutdown. As reported by AZ Central, four employees and two students were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19. They then spread the virus to family members and other Navajo communities.

The BIE is also accused of covering up COVID-19 cases at Tuba City Boarding School, where an employee who tested positive died last week, and Kaibeto Boarding School, where AZ Central reports that the school board accused the BIE of "endangering its staff and students."

BIE schools are not investigating the negligence that led to the spread of the coronavirus throughout the Navajo Nation, but are instead targeting educators who spoke to the press.

It is well documented that pandemics pose a disproportionate threat to Native American populations, and the rapid spread of COVID-19, which was first reported to be in the United States on January 20, could have been predicted. The 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic produced a mortality rate three-to-eight-times higher among Native Americans, and medical studies conducted during the swine flu pandemic reported the same underlying factors that link back to poverty.

As Navajo Nation authorities attempt to reduce the spread of coronavirus cases with measures that are too little and come far too late, tribal leaders are appealing for people to practice "ancestral ways of life," including growing food and "returning back to our ways."

Meanwhile, even New Mexico Governor Michelle Grisham has admitted that the pandemic could "wipe out" tribal nations. Native Americans must not rely on elites and their appeals to tradition, but on the growing opposition of the working class in the US and internationally to the failure of governments to take any effective measures to combat the disease, while using the health crisis as an excuse to implement long-standing plans to funnel trillions of dollars to the banks and corporations.

Native American workers should unite with their fellow workers to demand immediate and comprehensive testing and trillions in federal funds to provide needed medical equipment, build new hospitals and guarantee free and equal medical care for all. The murderous policies of the ruling class against Native Americans can be halted and reversed only through the struggle to put an end to capitalism and establish a society based on equality and the satisfaction of human need, not profit, i.e., socialism.

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