

Youth and the COVID-19 pandemic

Trévon Austin, Matthew MacEgan, Shuvu Batta
20 April 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is revealing the reality of social conditions for millions of workers and youth throughout the US and around the world. In the US, nearly 40,000 people have now died from the virus. More than 5 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits last week alone, bringing the total over the past four weeks to 22 million.

Dozens of videos have circulated showing families waiting in mile-long lines for food at shelters and food banks. To the shock of millions, images of coffins being lined up in a mass grave in New York have appeared on the front page of newspapers and been shared on social media hundreds of thousands of times.

These horrific conditions are the result of decades of ruling class policy, which have left the US, the center of world capitalism, completely unprepared for a significant health care emergency.

For youth, the event will undoubtedly be one of the defining events of their lives, imprinting forever in their minds the realities of life under capitalism in the world's richest country.

The health impact of the COVID-19 virus on youth

While the virus is known to be significantly more lethal for older people and for those with underlying conditions, it would be a horrible mistake to think that young people are somehow immune because of their age. There have been many harrowing cases of young people who caught the virus and ended up needing hospitalization and intubation, some of whom have died.

In fact, according to a report published by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) last Wednesday, over 25 percent of patients admitted to hospitals between March 1 and March 30 were less than 50 years of age. In some states, especially in the American South, the number of cases among younger patients is much higher. Recent reports coming from North Carolina show that 42 percent of reported cases in the state are between the ages of 24 and 49. An Alabama report states that 41 percent of deaths in the state were people aged between 19 and 64 years. Similar numbers have been reported for Georgia and Louisiana.

Dr. Cameron R. Wolfe, an associate professor of medicine at Duke University, has stated that it should not be a surprise that those who are in far more frequent contact with others are more likely to be exposed to a respiratory virus that's spread via droplet. Dr. Wolfe explained that most people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s are "around a wide variety of people each day," whether at work or the grocery store.

Anecdotal evidence from dozens of nurses at hospitals around the country confirms these statistics. One nurse at Elmhurst Hospital in New York City recently told the WSWs that most of her patients are young people: "I've never seen something like this," she said. "I've never seen so many young people die. It's terrible. We're totally unprepared for this."

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, who is chief of infectious diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital and a professor of medicine at Harvard,

told reporters recently that even young patients who do not have underlying medical conditions are getting very sick, and that it is impossible to predict who will or will not rapidly deteriorate. "We do know that it happens precipitously," she said. "One day they're okay, the next they require intubation. [It's] one of the scariest parts of this disease."

One of the most chilling cases took place in Los Angeles in late March. A teen—who later tested positive for the coronavirus—died of septic shock after being turned away from an urgent care facility because he did not have health insurance. Sepsis commonly occurs in the later stages of COVID-19 infection.

The 17-year-old's positive COVID-19 test did not arrive until after his death.

The high level of susceptibility to the virus among workers and youth in the US is the product of decades of austerity, cuts in wages, increasing health care costs, increasingly polluted environments, poor nutrition and lack of exercise. These conditions have produced a population that is chronically ill.

Consider a few of the following facts regarding the conditions facing American workers and youth:

- ? The majority of people under the age of 30 have less than \$1,000 in their savings accounts. *Nearly half have nothing saved at all.*

- ? The share of the "millennial" generation (those between the ages of 25 and 31) with \$0 in savings rose from 31 percent in 2016 to 46 percent in 2017.

- ? One in five millennials is living in poverty.

- ? Between 1978 and 2017, according to the Economic Policy Institute, CEO compensation rose in the US by 1,070 percent, while the typical worker's compensation over these 39 years rose by a mere 11.2 percent.

- ? According to the CDC, six in 10 adults in the United States have a chronic illness, four in 10 have two or more.

In a report published by the CDC Wednesday, nearly 90 percent of those admitted to hospitals with COVID-19 had underlying health conditions, the most common of which were hypertension, obesity, chronic lung disease, diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease. Among patients aged 18-49, obesity was the most prevalent underlying condition, followed by chronic lung disease (primarily asthma) and diabetes.

Dr. Edith Bracho-Sanchez, a pediatrician in New York, explained in a recent interview that while adults and people with underlying medical conditions are certainly the most severely impacted by the virus, "the American public, as a whole, has wide-ranging levels of underlying baseline health." She went on: "Close to two out of every 10 kids in this country are obese; nearly four out of every 10 young adults are. And that's just one baseline measure of health in the American public."

The percentage of Americans diagnosed with asthma, according to the CDC, was 7.7 percent in 2018, but the age groups with the highest percentages were those between the ages of 5 and 24, especially those between 15 and 19, of whom 11 percent have been diagnosed. About 10.5 percent of the US population (34.2 million) had diabetes in 2017, and it was estimated by the CDC that 21.4 percent of that number (7.3 million) were undiagnosed. A total of 88 million adults aged 18 and older had pre-

diabetes (34.5 percent of the adult population in the US).

Furthermore, approximately 18.5 percent of non-elderly adults in the United States do not have health insurance. According to a Gallup Poll taken in 2018, the uninsured rate for those younger than 35 was a staggering 21.6 percent. The vast majority of the uninsured, 70 percent, are considered poor or near-poor.

A report by the *Journal of American Medical Association* estimates that per capita spending on health insurance was over \$9,000 per year. This means that many of the uninsured, disproportionately young and poor, avoid health care altogether and will likely seek treatment for COVID-19 only at an advanced stage of the virus, possibly risking their lives.

The economic and social crisis facing the youth

Young people, including millennials and Generation Z, will be among the hardest hit segment of the working class in economic terms. Younger workers are overwhelmingly employed in unstable part-time jobs and in the “gig” economy, both among the hardest hit sections of the working class.

According to economists at the St. Louis Federal Reserve, unemployment in the United States could reach 47 million, or a rate of 32 percent. This would surpass the peak 24.9 percent unemployment rate of the Great Depression. The staggering figures from the Fed are based on prior studies that show 68.8 million workers are employed in “occupations with high risk of layoff.” These jobs include sales, production, food services and jobs in the gig economy.

Many young workers were already living paycheck to paycheck, with little to no savings before the pandemic hit. Those who are employed through the gig economy have few protections such as health insurance, guaranteed pay or paid sick leave, and are not paid a living wage. Despite holding down two or three jobs at a time in order to make a living, many of these workers are now left with no social safety net.

According to a study by the University of Chicago in 2017, more than four percent of adolescents and 10 percent of young adults nationwide were living on the street, in cars or shelters, or couch-surfing. One can only imagine what these figures look like under current conditions.

Eboni, a young student-worker in Detroit, was holding down two jobs, on top of her school workload, at Ford Field and Little Caesar’s Arena. Those jobs were among the first to be closed down. Eboni explained her situation to WSWs reporters: “Little Caesar’s gave us a small amount of our income for the month of March, and only for the events that we had applied to work on... Ford Field never paid us for any days we weren’t able to work.

“I’ve applied for unemployment, but it’s not going to be a lot. The phone lines for unemployment in Detroit have wait times of over two hours, and that’s just to speak to the automated computer system... it’s going to take a while before I get anything. And it’s not going to be a living wage.”

For those youth who are still in school, many have had to adjust to the loss of income from work study jobs as their education has been moved online. Thousands more face growing food insecurity as campuses shut down dining halls. Many college students living in off-campus apartments are still being charged for rent, despite having no way to pay for it, leading many to demand a reduction in their tuition.

Students at University of Miami in Florida and Drexel University in Pennsylvania have filed lawsuits demanding a lowering of their tuition costs, arguing that they did not pay exorbitant fees for online education. A year’s worth of tuition is \$51,930 at the University of Miami and \$54,516 at Drexel. At New York University, over 11,000 students have signed a

petition calling for partial tuition refunds.

The coronavirus has made payment on college loans impossible for many former students. Under the CARES Act, federal loan payments are suspended until September 30, but the balance on these loans remains unchanged. Students still have to pay on private loans.

According to a study by Northwestern Mutual, the average millennial has \$27,800 in personal debt. As the coronavirus forces many to tap into their credit reserves, this figure will likely drastically increase.

Regarding the broader impact of the CARES Act, Eboni told the WSWs that it “shows the complete inability of the capitalist system to really care about the working class.” She continued: “We’re literally fighting for crumbs, for this \$1,200 check, which won’t even cover a lot of people’s rent, phone bills, groceries, while they’re bailing out Wall Street. It’s extremely frustrating.

“Hopefully, by the time this pandemic comes to a close people will realize that the true heroes were the health professionals, the grocery workers, the Amazon workers, the bus drivers, the sanitation workers, not the government, at all, or the ruling class.”

The situation is particularly acute for low-income students. Stress caused by financial instability hinders a student’s ability to succeed. According to the most recent data from the Department of Education, only 14 percent of low-income students obtain a bachelor’s degree within the first eight years of enrollment. Poorer students often have to work multiple jobs or deal with family responsibilities in addition to their class work, making it difficult to study.

Anmarie, a senior at Macaulay Honors College at Baruch College, part of the City University of New York (CUNY), spoke to the WSWs about the emotional impact. “Uncertainty about the future and about the fate of elderly relatives has made it extremely difficult to focus on course work,” she said. She added that as a senior, the upending of school had been particularly difficult.

“We are dealing with the stress of relocating back home, canceled or postponed commencement activities, and the uncertainty of the job market as a result of the pandemic,” she said. “We are stressed, confused and scared about what the future brings.”

The pressures low-income students face are exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. Students are forced to do their work at home without access to the resources, such as computers and the internet, which are required to complete their courses. Students previously living on campus have had to move back in with their families, sometimes in cramped or uneasy living conditions. Those with children have the additional pressure of home-schooling and day care closures.

The economic fallout of the pandemic increases the chances that low-income students will drop out of school. Students trying to lift themselves out of poverty will be hurled back into the financial situation they sought to escape. These stressors are compounded by job losses and the resulting economic turmoil, not to mention the emotional toll that comes with the loss of a family member or the fear of infecting a loved one.

The onset of the pandemic has exacerbated the horrific conditions facing young workers, the consequences of a forty-year social counterrevolution against the working class. In addition to the economic hardship, the entirety of the crisis and the criminal response by the government are having a significant social impact on the younger generations.

Youth should be a time filled with hope, optimism and idealism. Yet the reality of life today for many, both before and after the onset of the pandemic, has turned youth into a period of struggle and, for some, of despair.

Studies show that young people today suffer from more mental health challenges than all previous generations. In fact, a recent report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that the suicide rate among Americans aged 10 to 24 increased by 56 percent between 2007 and 2017.

The conditions that produce harrowing social ills such as mental illness, drug abuse and even suicide are ultimately the product of decades of policies implemented by the Democrats and Republicans. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic has revealed most sharply that their interests are incompatible with human progress and the very survival of mankind.

The political radicalization of youth

COVID-19 is fundamentally altering the political landscape for workers all around the world. Seared into mass consciousness are countless photos and accounts of nurses and doctors battling the virus on the front lines, photographs of helpless patients awaiting death in hospitals, images of a mass grave in New York and other examples of desperation and desolation. These experiences will never be forgotten.

Almost overnight, every aspect of life has been impacted. The Trump administration and the Democrats responded to the crisis by passing the grotesquely misnamed CARES Act, which funnels countless trillions of dollars to the corporate-financial aristocracy that rules America.

David, a student in San Diego, told WSWs reporters that while the pandemic was unexpected, the response of the ruling class was unsurprising. “I know the ruling class won’t act in response to the coronavirus in time,” he said. “I’m not even surprised at the extent of its unwillingness to act. It confirms what I’ve suspected all along. They will put profit over people.”

Noting President Trump’s obsessive fixation with the stock market, he said, “The president didn’t start acting until stock markets crashed, but when the markets started recovering he began pushing back-to-work orders.”

Young people are drawing far-reaching conclusions about the nature of the capitalist system and what is required to fight it. The events surrounding the pandemic are accelerating a process of radicalization that has been developing among workers and youth over decades, particularly since the 2008 financial crash.

In 2018, a month after 17 people were gunned down at a high school in Parkland, Florida, broad anger over mass shootings and gun violence triggered one of the largest mobilizations in US history. Well over one million people participated in more than 800 demonstrations in all 50 states and 390 of the country’s 435 congressional districts, plus several protests overseas.

Just over a year ago, a survey released by YouGov and sponsored by the right-wing Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation found that over half of millennials and Generation Z had a favorable view of the word “socialism.” In addition, 22 percent of millennials believed that “society would be better if all private property was abolished,” and one in three had a favorable view of communism.

The radicalization of young people is part of a broader movement of the entire international working class. In the US, the last two years have witnessed the largest number of work stoppages involving 1,000 workers or more in over two decades. Teachers across the US have engaged in major strikes in West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Oregon and other states. Over 46,000 auto workers engaged in a 40-day strike at General Motors last year, the first national strike by US autoworkers in decades.

This growing mood of anger and discontent among youth found initial, and distorted, expression in the Sanders presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020. Sanders was only the temporary beneficiary of a rising tide of popular opposition that was passing through its initial stages of social and class differentiation.

Over the past few weeks, in the midst of the pandemic, Sanders has ended his campaign and for the second time in four years told his supporters to back the most right-wing Democratic candidate available. The timing of the windup of Sanders’ campaign is highly significant. Just at the point where social anger among workers and youth over the response of the ruling class to the coronavirus pandemic threatens revolutionary upheavals, Sanders has fallen in line behind the Democratic Party leadership.

There is no doubt that the end of the Sanders campaign has begun to shatter the illusions of youth in electoral politics.

Students, youth and workers are looking for a way to fight. They are increasingly identifying themselves as socialists and coming to understand that the problems they face are rooted in the capitalist system, which subordinates all aspects of life to private profit.

Recalling the 2016 Sanders experience, Eboni told our reporters:

“What Sanders is doing now, by backing Biden, is basically the same thing he did in 2016. You know, you have to pick the ‘lesser of the two evils.’ Trump was ‘way worse’ than Clinton, so you had to support her regardless of your own opinion and beliefs. And by not voting for her, or in this case, Joe Biden, it’s your fault if Trump gets elected. That’s putting the blame on the working class if he gets elected, in order to pressure workers to vote for the Democrats regardless of the fact that they won’t do anything for you.”

She said she felt the “lesser of two evils” argument “is that one will kill you and the other won’t kill you immediately.” She continued: “I think the Democratic Party as a whole is trying to keep all of the anger and frustration that the working class has against capitalism within the Democratic Party, so that it won’t get out of the confines of the Democratic Party and won’t move workers toward socialism.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact