

The coronavirus pandemic fuels the class struggle

Joseph Kishore—SEP candidate for US president
30 April 2020

The response of the ruling class and capitalist governments throughout the world to the coronavirus pandemic is producing a growing wave of walkouts, sick-outs, demonstrations and other forms of social unrest.

In the United States, a global epicenter of the pandemic, there have been at least 140 wildcat strikes since the beginning of March, according to Payday Report, which aggregates local news accounts.

A broad array of workers from every part of the country have participated, including bus drivers in Detroit (March 16); postal workers in Oklahoma (March 19); sewerage workers in Cleveland (March 20); postal workers in Dallas (March 31); Nabisco snack workers in Portland (April 9); Boeing airplane workers in Washington (April 20); building construction workers in New York City (April 28); recycling plant workers in Illinois (April 28); and transit workers in North Carolina (April 29).

A center of social unrest is now among workers at meatpacking plants, where there has been a wave of coronavirus cases and at least 20 deaths. Workers at Smithfield Foods pork plant in Nebraska walked off the job in a wildcat strike on Tuesday after company executives announced that they would not implement previously announced plans to close the plant. On Monday, workers at a Cold Spring chicken plant in Minnesota walked off the job after several workers tested positive for COVID-19.

There have also been widespread strikes and protests by Amazon, Whole Foods, McDonald's, Starbucks, Lyft and Instacart workers throughout the country. Over the weekend, fifty workers at Amazon's Shakopee warehouse in Minnesota walked after several positive tests and after one worker was reportedly fired for staying at home.

Developments in the United States are part of an international growth of social unrest. The past month has seen strikes and walkouts of nurses in Papua New Guinea; doctors in Zimbabwe; sanitation and clothing workers in

the UK; distribution and shipping workers in Australia; garment workers in Bangladesh; call center workers in Brazil; and maquiladora factory workers south of the US-Mexico border, to name just a few.

There are many specific issues motivating these protests, but all revolve around the basic reality: For the working class, the fight against the pandemic and for their lives is at the same time a fight against capitalism. The logic of these struggles raises the question of political power—who shall control society, the capitalist ruling elite or the working class?

Many of the struggles have centered on the lack of adequate safety measures and protective equipment for workers on the job. Despite persistent warnings from scientists and epidemiologists, nothing was done to prepare for the pandemic.

Decades of ruling class policy decimated social and health care infrastructure, while deregulation has given corporations a free hand to force workers to labor under unsafe conditions. The proliferation of part-time work in the “gig economy” means that large sections of the working class work for poverty-level wages, with no benefits or safety protections.

Other struggles were aimed at shutting down production at non-essential workplaces. The initial response of the ruling class to the pandemic was to try to downplay it, to keep businesses operating as normal. In mid-March, autoworkers in the US and across the border in Canada launched a series of wildcat walkouts that forced the closure of auto plants throughout North America. Even as the pandemic overwhelmed health care systems, large sections of non-essential production remained in operation.

Increasingly, the struggles of workers are centered on the efforts of the ruling elites to force a return to work even as the pandemic spreads. On Tuesday, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to force meatpacking

workers back to work. Far from protecting workers from the spread of the virus, Trump's order instead protects meatpacking companies from legal liability from workers who report that they are being forced to work in unsafe conditions.

In other words, Trump is telling corporate America: Kill your employees, and you will face no consequences. What is being done for meatpacking workers will be repeated in different forms for the entire working class.

The class conflict will intensify enormously in the coming weeks and months. The financial oligarchy has utilized the pandemic to transfer trillions of dollars to Wall Street, with the unanimous support of the entire political establishment, Democrat and Republican. All of this will be paid through cuts in social programs, education, and health care, along with a massive intensification of the exploitation of the working class.

Already, Boeing—which sent workers back to work at the beginning of last week—has announced that it is cutting 10 percent of its workforce. Other companies will follow suit. The ruling elite will attempt to use the economic desperation of millions of workers not only to force them back to work, but also to get them to agree to cuts in wages and benefits.

This policy will encounter mass opposition. The actions of the ruling class have not gone unnoticed. The wave of walkouts and protests, generally isolated in different cities, workplaces and countries, is only the initial expression of the pent-up anger.

How can this opposition be developed?

First, it must be organized and unified. This requires the establishment of rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees. All the opportunities provided by modern technology, including social media, must be used to connect the separate struggles of workers into a common counter-offensive of the entire working class. These committees must be absolutely independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which have done nothing to organize opposition and are working closely with corporations and the capitalist state to get workers back on the job.

Second, the struggle of workers must be unified across all racial, gender and national lines. The pandemic is a global problem that requires a global solution. The response of capitalist governments throughout the world is the same, and the interests of workers in every country are identical. It is necessary to reject all efforts to divert social anger along national lines, including through the anti-China campaign being whipped up by the Trump

administration and the Democrats.

Third, industrial action must be connected to a new political perspective, which begins with an understanding that the fundamental problem is capitalism—a social and economic system that subordinates everything to the interests of profit and the accumulation of wealth by the corporate and financial elite.

The response of governments to the pandemic has at every stage been aimed at preserving and advancing the interests of the capitalist oligarchs. The priority has not been saving lives, but saving profits. It is this that has prevented any scientific, rational and globally coordinated response to the pandemic.

The alternative to capitalism is socialism—the restructuring of social and economic life, on a world scale, to meet social need, not private profit.

At the beginning of 2020, in its statement “The decade of socialist revolution begins,” the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, “The objective conditions for socialist revolution emerge out of the global crisis. The approach of social revolution has already been foreshadowed in the mass demonstrations and strikes that swept across the globe in 2019.”

Only a few months into the year, the correctness of this analysis has been confirmed. The fight of the working class against the pandemic must be transformed into the revolutionary struggle for socialism.

On May 2, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the World Socialist Web Site are holding an online rally to mark May Day, the historic day of international working class solidarity. We urge all of our readers to register today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact