

The COVID-19 pandemic and global imperialist war

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The following speech was delivered by Bill Van Auken, the Latin American editor of the World Socialist Web Site, to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally held by the WSW and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2.

Dear comrades and friends:

We mark this May Day 2020 under conditions of a common struggle of workers all over the world for their very lives and basic rights against the criminal response of the ruling capitalist classes of every country to the coronavirus pandemic.

Even as COVID-19 threatens to claim the lives of millions, the threat of a new world war that could wipe out billions, far from being diminished by the global pandemic, has only escalated.

Imperialism has taken neither sick leave nor a holiday; it does not sleep. For all of the vapid talk about us all being in it together, the US ruling class views the pandemic as an instrument of war. It has relentlessly sought to weaponize the virus to achieve the same geo-strategic aims that it was pursuing before the coronavirus began claiming hundreds of thousands of lives and forcing the shutdown of entire economies.

This week, US Air Force Global Strike Commander General Timothy Ray, who oversees hundreds of nuclear-armed US strategic bombers and ICBM missiles, addressed both the American public and US imperialism's strategic rivals, declaring:

"Rest assured, we have taken the necessary steps to make sure our bomber and ICBM forces are ready to go and can reach any target on the planet at any time. We are fully mission-ready and COVID-19 will not change that."

Earlier, last month, General Ray said in an interview that his command's "nukes are still ready to fly."

The world is shocked by the sight of patients dying

by the thousands in overcrowded emergency rooms, of coffins stacked in mass graves and decomposing corpses piled up in rental trucks in the streets of New York City—a portrait of American capitalism in deep decay.

If imperialism is not stopped by the revolutionary mobilization of the international working class, it will inflict infinitely worse suffering. A single 40-kiloton warhead dropped on Manhattan, however, would leave roughly a quarter of a million dead and another quarter of a million wounded, with no ICUs, hospitals or medical staff to treat them.

"The nukes are ready to fly." Seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, military commanders and political leaders are starting from the premise that a third world war between the major powers is not some remote possibility, but rather highly probable and even inevitable.

As our previous speaker, comrade Peter Symonds, has made clear, the first and foremost target of US militarism in China. However, Washington is carrying out aggression all over the world.

At the height of the pandemic in the US, President Donald Trump sent a flotilla of warships to the coast of Venezuela, while tweeting an order to the US Navy to attack and sink Iranian patrol boats monitoring the provocative deployment of American warships in the Persian Gulf. The US administration has sought to weaponize the pandemic, ratcheting up sanctions against both Iran, which has faced one of the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in the world, and Venezuela, whose health care system is on the brink of collapse.

While these sudden and unprovoked war threats have an air of hysteria and desperation—a flailing about in the face of the coronavirus crisis—there is a definite method to the madness. Washington aims to harness mass

sickness and death to its aggressive “maximum pressure” campaigns for regime change in both of these oil-rich countries.

Three decades of US wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan have created only a series of debacles. Far from achieving Washington’s aims of clawing back global hegemony eroded by the relative decline of the global position of American capitalism, US imperialism today is confronting what is termed, in military and foreign policy parlance as “strategic competition” from Russia and China. At the same time, ever-sharper conflicts are emerging between Washington and its erstwhile NATO partners, in particular Germany, against which the US fought in two world wars.

Preparations for such conflicts are fueling a gargantuan military budget that is projected to rise to \$741 billion in the coming year, with \$50 billion allocated for the development of the US nuclear triad, and \$500 billion over the next ten years.

Meanwhile the Centers for Disease Control, the main US agency for confronting pandemics, has seen its budget relentlessly slashed, now amounting to barely 1.5 percent of that of the Pentagon.

Nothing could sum up more clearly the criminal and irrational character of the capitalist system. Like the trillions funneled into Wall Street, the trillions lavished upon building weapons of mass destruction, while yielding obscene profits for CEOs and major shareholders, represents resources stolen from society as millions upon millions suffer from the coronavirus, mass unemployment and hunger.

American militarism, however, is far from almighty. This was made clear in the events aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier that is supposed to stand as a symbol of US power. The coronavirus swept through its crowded decks like wildfire, with at least 900 of its crew now infected with the disease. The ship’s commander beseeched his superiors to bring the carrier to port and disembark and quarantine his crew, insisting: “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die.”

This action infuriated the Trump administration, which was attempting to minimize the threat from the pandemic and believes that US imperialism is very much at war and that if sailors have to die, so be it. For its part, the crew gave its fired captain a tumultuous send-off that bordered on mutiny. His action had cut

across a policy of military aggression in which their lives are of no more consequence—in the final analysis—than those of the Iranians, Venezuelans, Yemenis, Afghans, Iraqis or Somalis that US imperialism kills on a daily basis.

Even more significant are the strikes by the Mexican maquiladora workers that have cut off key supplies to the US arms industry, even as workers across the border in the US have also struck and protested at arms plants against conditions that threaten their health and their very lives as well.

The same insoluble crisis that is driving world capitalism to war is driving the world’s working class to revolution.

The only answer to the criminal drive to war lies in the mobilization of the international working class against capitalism. Workers must fight for the expropriation of the vast arms industry without compensation and the confiscation of the obscene profits of its major shareholders, so that these resources can be mobilized to combat the global pandemic and assure the social needs of the vast majority of the population. These indispensable demands are bound inextricably to the fight for the transfer of power to the working class and the establishment of socialism on an international scale.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, must be built in every country to lead this struggle. We urge all those participating in this online May Day rally to join us in building this party.



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