

# Capitalist economics and the politics of death

David North

11 May 2020

In defiance of overwhelming popular opposition, the Trump administration, a majority of state governments, multi-billion-dollar corporations and Wall Street financial interests are driving ahead with plans for a rapid reopening of the US economy.

The auto industry is leading the charge for a premature and deadly return to work. Succumbing to massive political and economic pressure, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer has sanctioned today's resumption of production by auto parts suppliers and tool and die shops. Major auto companies intend to resume production in the state next week.

Honda is resuming production today throughout the United States and Canada. This includes plants in Ohio, South Carolina, North Carolina, Indiana, Georgia and Alabama.

California Governor Gavin Newsom has permitted manufacturers, along with warehouse and logistics facilities, to reopen as of last Friday.

In Florida, Texas and numerous other states, consumer and retail services, including salons and barbershops, have been—or will be in a few days—reopened. Missouri is sanctioning the opening of all businesses and will permit public concerts to take place.

In effect, efforts to contain the spread of the pandemic within the United States have all but collapsed. The Trump administration is implementing a de facto policy of “herd immunity” that will result in the coming months in tens of thousands—and, potentially, hundreds of thousands—of deaths that could be avoided if appropriate measures were taken to contain the spread of the pandemic.

But the Trump administration, having already withdrawn all US support for the operations of the World Health Organization, is actively sabotaging the efforts of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to even moderately restrain corporations demanding an immediate return to work.

The reopening of factories and other work locations is taking place as the pandemic continues to spiral out of control. Over the weekend, the total number of COVID-19 deaths passed 80,000 in the United States. During the first 10 days of May, the death toll increased by more than 15,000. Moreover, as the virus spreads throughout the population, the disease is manifesting new symptoms and expanding the scope of its victims.

Doctors, who struggled throughout March and April to counteract COVID-19's attack on the human respiratory system, have discovered in recent weeks that the virus is also attacking kidneys, the brain, circulatory system and muscles.

The most frightening development has been the emergence of a deadly illness among young children, whose symptoms resemble that of Kawasaki Disease, that has been definitely linked to the COVID-19 virus. Epidemiologists report that the incubation period among children appears to be between two and four weeks. This means that children who were infected in April will become seriously ill in the weeks ahead.

Parents, who had been assured that young children were not threatened by the pandemic, will be deeply troubled by this new danger. Workers being forced to return to their jobs now must confront the very real possibility that they, if infected while at work, may transmit the disease on to their children, with horrifying consequences.

The degree of the Trump administration's recklessness and criminal

indifference to the fate of the population is underscored by the fact that the virus is rampaging through the West Wing of the White House.

A personal valet of Trump tested positive. Katie Miller—the press secretary of Vice President Mike Pence and the wife of one of Trump's principal advisers, the fascist Stephen Miller—also tested positive. Three top officials of the White House's coronavirus task force—Dr. Anthony Fauci, Dr. Robert R. Redfield and Dr. Stephen Hahn—are now in self-quarantine as a result of having been exposed to infected individuals.

It has been reported that Trump threw a tantrum when he learned that he may have been exposed to the virus. According to the *Washington Post*, Trump “was annoyed to learn that Ms. Miller had tested positive and has been growing irritated with people who get too close to him...”

The *Post* further reports, “The discovery of the two infected employees has prompted the White House to ramp up the procedures to combat the virus, asking more staff members to work from home, increased usage of masks and more rigorously screening of people who enter the complex.”

The situation at the White House exposes the deceit and hypocrisy, rooted in class interests and privilege, that characterize all aspects of the Trump administration's response to the pandemic. While it has been unable to prevent the spread of the virus in the White House—the most heavily guarded building in the world—the government demands that ordinary working Americans return to jobs where there are little or no effective procedures in place to prevent the transmission of infections. Those who work in the proximity of the president are told to work from home, which is a privilege not available to tens of millions of workers.

Trump's statements and actions are those of a sociopathic personality. But his policies are driven by the interests of the corporate-financial elite. The demand for the “reopening of the economy”—the phrase that is used to legitimize a criminal policy—means nothing else but resuming the unrestrained exploitation of the working class, whatever the cost in human life.

The *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon owner Jeff Bezos, bluntly acknowledges that the Trump administration is “asking Americans to accept a devastating proposition: that a steady, daily accumulation of lonely deaths is a grim cost of reopening the nation.”

In fact, Americans are being told, not asked, to return to work under conditions that will result in a massive loss of life. In the latest Pew Poll, released at the end of the past week, two-thirds of those questioned declared their opposition to a premature reopening of the economy.

In a typically cynical editorial statement, titled, “The Economic Lockdown Catastrophe,” the *Wall Street Journal* asked: “Well, after Friday's horrific jobs report, how do you like the shutdown now?” The premise that underlies this loaded question is that tens of millions of Americans will be impoverished and go hungry unless they return to work. There is no other choice.

In response to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Socialist Equality Party poses another question: In the light of the catastrophic loss of life and social devastation affecting millions of lives, how do you like the bailout of Wall Street now?

From the earliest stages of the pandemic, the response of the Trump administration has been determined by the interests of the corporate-

financial oligarchy. The priority of the government has been saving Wall Street investments and capitalist wealth, not human lives. In fact, the two objectives—protecting Wall Street rentiers and speculators or fighting the pandemic and protecting working people—are totally incompatible.

This fundamental socio-economic contradiction—i.e., the irreconcilable conflict between the capitalist class and the working class—finds its most obscene expression in the correlation between the number of dead, unemployed and impoverished, and, on the other side of the ledger, the explosive rise of share values on Wall Street.

Since the passage of the multi-trillion-dollar bailout in late March, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has risen approximately 35 percent. The Nasdaq index is at its 2020 high. During the first 10 days of May, while the number of dead rose by approximately 15,000, the Dow gained more than 600 points.

The more terrible the reports of death and human suffering, the more ecstatic the response of the capitalist markets. The contrast between “Wall Street” and “Main Street” is so extreme that it is now being commented on widely in the financial press.

The reason for the explosive rise in share values is well understood. The Trump administration, with the unanimous support of Republican and Democratic legislators—including, among the latter, Senator Bernie Sanders—committed trillions of dollars to save Wall Street.

Explaining the euphoria on Wall Street, the authoritative *Economist* writes in its most recent issue:

Much of the improved mood is because of the Fed, which has acted more dramatically than other central banks, buying up assets on an unimagined scale. It is committed to purchasing even more corporate debt, including high-yield “junk” bonds. The market for new issues of corporate bonds, which froze in February, has reopened in spectacular style. Companies have issued \$560bn of bonds in the past six weeks, double the normal level. Even beached cruise-line firms have been able to raise cash, albeit at a high price. A cascade of bankruptcies at big firms has been forestalled. The central bank has, in effect, backstopped the cashflow of America Inc. The stockmarket has taken the hint and climbed.

Having spent, and continuing to spend, unlimited sums of money to save the ruling elite—and thus massively increasing the national debt—the Trump administration, the political establishment and the capitalist media demand that the masses of working people get back on the job. There is no money to fight the pandemic and to provide support for the unemployed. The *Wall Street Journal* quotes with approval the words of New York’s Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo: “Government has done everything it could.”

In fact, it has done nothing. The Trump administration’s demand for a return to work has made clear that the fight against the pandemic cannot simply be waged on the medical front. The working class is confronted, above all, with a political and social struggle against the capitalist system.

Fighting the pandemic requires advancing a socialist program, irreconcilably opposed to economic interests of the capitalist class and the capitalist system as a whole.

In the face of an unprecedented national and global crisis, with countless millions of lives at stake, the interests of the working class—the overwhelming majority of the population—can only be taken forward by ending the corporate-financial dictatorship over social policy and redeploying economic resources on the basis of the socialist reorganization of economic life.

In this critical situation, the Socialist Equality Party advances the

following demands:

- The rejection of all demands for a return to work until the spread of the pandemic is stopped and safe and healthy conditions can be established in all workplaces.
- The provision of a monthly income to all families, in an amount sufficient to guarantee a decent standard of living until a return to work is possible. This income should be supplemented with a suspension of mortgages, rents, interest payments, and utility bills, along with the cancellation of student debt.
- The provision of relief to small businesses, at an amount sufficient to maintain the economic viability of the enterprise and the wages and salaries of its employees until its operations can be resumed.
- The immediate repudiation of the CARES Act and the return of all funds disbursed to privately-owned financial and corporate institutions.
- The expropriation of all large financial and corporate institutions and their conversion into democratically-controlled public utilities.
- A massive increase of the tax rate to at least 90 percent on salaries and all unearned income derived from speculative investments that place individuals within the top five percent bracket.
- The dismantling of the socially destructive military-corporate complex, and the redirection of its massive budget to socially-progressive purposes.

This program cannot be realized through the existing political parties and institutional structures of the capitalist class. It must be fought for through the independent political mobilization of the working class. The purpose of this program is not the reform of the capitalist system, but its replacement with a socialist economic system, based on democratic forms of rule created by the working class in the course of struggle.

Above all, in fighting for this program, the American working class must actively appeal for the support of workers throughout the world, who are its natural allies in the fight against global capitalism. The pandemic, which affects workers in all countries, demonstrates the necessity for the unification of the international working class in the global struggle for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party is contesting the 2020 national election. Its presidential and vice-presidential candidates—Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz—will utilize the opportunity provided by this campaign to fight for this revolutionary socialist program.

We appeal to workers and youth, readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and to supporters of the Socialist Equality Party to become actively involved in this critical struggle, upon which the future of humanity depends.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:  
**wsws.org/contact**