Pandemic fuels class struggle across Africa

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created devastating conditions for the whole of Africa. By October 14, the continent had recorded 38,633 deaths and surpassed 1.6 million infections.

According to the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the countries most affected by the disease in terms of the number of positive cases include South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Ethiopia, and Nigeria.

South Africa has been the hardest hit country, with both the highest number of cases (694,537) and deaths (18,028), followed by Egypt with 104,787 cases and 6,071 deaths, Morocco with 156,946 cases and 2,685 deaths, Algeria with 53,399 cases and 1,818 deaths, Ethiopia with 85,718 cases and 1,305 deaths, Nigeria with 60,655 cases and 1,116 deaths, Sudan with 13,691 cases and 836 deaths, and Kenya with 41,937 cases and 787 deaths. These eight countries collectively account for more than 80 percent of Africa's reported deaths from COVID-19.

Despite having 17 percent of the global population, Africa has accounted for just 3.4 percent of global cases and 2.6 percent of global deaths, although these figures are known to be an underestimate given the generally low level of testing. This lower death rate is believed to be the result of the much younger median age in African countries and the widespread BCG vaccination at birth against tuberculosis, which may offer some protection. Another factor is the early implementation of disease control measures, including isolation, quarantining and contact tracing, and lockdown measures, including the closure of schools and workplaces and travel bans.

The very limited nature of Africa's healthcare systems, with doctors and nurses working without proper personal protective equipment (PPE), has resulted in a high number of health worker infections, with 43,868 infections reported in 43 countries since the beginning of the outbreak. South Africa has been the most affected, with over 27,360 health workers infected, followed by Algeria (2,300), Nigeria (2,175), Ghana (2,065), Ethiopia (1,506), and Kenya (1,029). At the beginning of September, Amnesty International reported that 240 healthcare professionals had died of the disease in South Africa, 159 in Egypt and 84 in Algeria.

The lack of hospitals and the paucity of their infrastructure, especially the number of ventilators for treating the disease, has been exacerbated by the criminal diversion of funds allocated to fight the pandemic. In South Africa, several top officials in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) were implicated in inflating prices of PPE and giving government contracts to combat the pandemic to relatives and close family members. The Ugandan ambassador and her deputy to Denmark were recalled after being recorded in a Zoom call plotting to steal funds directed towards fighting COVID-19. In Somalia, several officials were given heavy sentences for misappropriating funds related to the pandemic, while in Kenya at least 15 top government officials and businesspeople are to be prosecuted over the alleged misuse of millions of dollars meant for buying medical supplies.

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where about half the population lack access to electricity and only 10 percent of households have access to a computer, school closures meant that at least 120 million pupils—about half the 250 million in the region—were unable to access remote learning even if such facilities were available. Only the elite schools were able to provide distance learning for their pupils, exacerbating existing educational inequalities. According to the World Bank, even before the pandemic, 53 percent of children in low and middle-income countries were unable to read and understand a simple piece of text by the age of 10.

A World Health Organisation survey of 39 SSA countries found that the disruption to education resulted in poor nutrition, stress, increased exposure to violence and exploitation, childhood pregnancies, and an adverse impact on children's mental development. UNICEF found that in Eastern and Southern Africa, where 10 million children were missing out on school meals, nutrition rates had decreased, with girls—particularly those

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displaced or from low-income households—most at risk.

As many as 10 percent of school children could drop out as their families have been pushed further into poverty due to the economic impact of the pandemic. The International Labour Organization (ILO) said that there might be an increase in child labour for the first time in 20 years, while the World Bank has highlighted the potential long-term social and economic impact of school closures that could result in lifetime earnings losses of $4,500 per child.

Under conditions where only a quarter of schools in sub-Saharan Africa have basic hygiene services and less than half have basic sanitation, the reopening of schools means the unlimited transmission of the disease.

The economic impact of the virus has produced a social catastrophe for the overwhelming majority of Africans who work as day labourers in the informal economy or on the land, are without unemployment benefits, and face poverty, eviction and hunger. The World Bank is predicting that growth in sub-Saharan Africa will shrink by up to 5 percent in 2020, compared to 2.4 percent growth in 2019, pushing the region into its first recession in 25 years and driving up to 40 million people into extreme poverty, making Africa the epicentre of extreme poverty.

Nigeria's GDP fell by 6.1 percent year-on-year in the second quarter of 2020, while South Africa saw its real GDP contract by 17.1 percent. Angola, SSA's second largest oil producer after Nigeria, saw its economy contract by 1.8 percent. The contraction has been greatest among metals exporters where real GDP is expected to contract by 6 percent, while oil exporters are expected to see a contraction of 4 percent. This will cost the region at least $115 billion in output losses in 2020, while GDP per capita will shrink by 6 percent as the loss of income from tourism and remittances takes its toll.

The gap between rich and poor, already greater than in any other region apart from Latin America, will widen amid the already pervasive conditions of immense poverty and grotesque and rising inequality. According to Oxfam, the richest 0.0001 percent own 40 percent of the wealth of the entire continent, while Africa's three richest billionaire men have more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of Africa's 1.2 billion population.

The global recession has fuelled SSA's debt crisis, with a growing number of poor countries, some already in humanitarian crisis, having to channel an ever-growing proportion of their revenues to the banks and commercial creditors. As low-income countries are due to pay at least $40 billion to banks and bondholders this year, some—like Zambia—are planning to freeze their interest payments. Meanwhile, the UN's flagship $10.19 billion appeal to raise emergency funds to help the poorest countries' response to the pandemic has raised just $2.8 billion.

The working class is manifesting its discontent with the situation in a resurgent wave of political radicalisation that had briefly abated after the onset of the pandemic. In recent months, there have been protests and strikes across the continent, including in Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Algeria, Tunisia, Kenya and most recently in Nigeria, where week-long mass protests against police brutality forced the government to announce the immediate abolition of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the notorious unit long accused of grotesque abuses, including murders.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which has monitored shifts in protest patterns around the globe through the COVID-19 Disorder Tracker (CDT), state repression has increased by 30 percent, with close to 1,800 incidents where state forces targeted civilians, much of it across East and West Africa.

The escalation of state violence against workers is the desperate response to the growth of social conflicts that manifest themselves ever more openly as a confrontation between two social classes with irreconcilable interests. On one side is a billionaire elite and its corrupt and violent states, and on the other, the urban and rural working masses, increasingly impoverished and railing against the prevailing social order.

All these venal governments are united in their struggle against the working class, spreading lies and disorganising the fight against the pandemic, while forcing workers into contaminated workplaces to generate profits and guarantee the privileges of the capitalist kleptocracy. But the strength of the working class united as an independent political force is far greater. The fundamental question posed for African workers is the construction of a revolutionary leadership that unifies them with their class brothers and sisters internationally and leads them in struggle to overthrow the capitalist system and reorganise society based on socialist policies.

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