

The political lessons of the pandemic and the fight for socialism in 2021

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1. As the New Year begins, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to sweep across the globe. This is a world crisis of vast historical significance. The pandemic is a “trigger event” that manifests in a highly concentrated form the contradictions of the world capitalist system and is unleashing long-suppressed forces of social transformation.

2. The pandemic cannot be described as merely a medical crisis. In the course of the past year, the thoroughly reactionary character of world capitalism has been exposed. The interaction of the drive for profit regardless of social cost, the lust of the oligarchs for obscene levels of personal wealth, and their inhuman indifference to the lives and welfare of the world’s population has created a global social catastrophe.

3. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has frequently compared the pandemic to the outbreak of World War I. The events of 1914 and all that followed as a consequence of the war set into motion a process of political upheaval that swept across the globe. The working class and impoverished masses were politically radicalized. Empires that had appeared all-powerful and invincible at the beginning of 1914—the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian and the Prussian—were overthrown within a matter of years by the forces of social revolution. An anti-imperialist movement against colonial domination, embracing hundreds of millions of people, emerged in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

4. The tragedy of the past year, which continues into the New Year, is effecting a profound change in the consciousness of the international working class and youth. The year 2020—marked by mass untimely death, economic dislocation, and the obvious crisis and breakdown of traditional political structures, whether pseudo-democratic or openly authoritarian—will prove as critical a turning point in the history of the twenty-first century as 1914 was in the history of the twentieth century. The contradiction between the interests of the rich and the needs of mass society is so glaring that it must provoke social protest and uncompromising political opposition.

5. At the start of last year, the International Committee declared in its New Year statement that the 2020s would be a decade of social revolution. This prediction was based on an analysis of the already advanced stage of global geopolitical and socioeconomic crisis. The events of 2020 have not only confirmed this analysis, but also imparted to it a heightened urgency.

6. Far from abating, the impact of the pandemic is intensifying. Even before the discovery of a new and more infectious strain of the virus, the velocity of COVID-19’s spread through the world’s population had been accelerating. The global death toll reached almost two million before the turn of the New Year. In Asia, 305,000 deaths have been reported. In Africa, the official death toll is 63,000. In Europe, 552,000 people have died. In the Americas, there have been 848,000 deaths.

7. The total number of deaths in individual countries is staggering. In Brazil, nearly 200,000 people have died. In the United Kingdom, the total is just over 71,000. The number of deaths in Italy is 72,000. In France,

63,000 lives have been lost. In Spain, 50,000 have died. In Germany, the death toll is 30,000.

8. The most disastrous situation in the world is in the United States, where the pandemic is raging out of control. The total number of COVID-19 deaths reached 340,000 in 2020. In the month of December, approximately 70,000 Americans died of the virus, with the daily death toll reaching as high as 3,500. It is now predicted that approximately 115,000 more Americans will die in January. Despite the efforts of the news media to divert attention from the ongoing nightmare by focusing on the development of anti-COVID vaccines, the reality is that Americans are dying at a rate that exceeds the annual toll of even its bloodiest wars.

9. The media hype that accompanied the release of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines is already being discredited by the entirely predictable chaos that has characterized their rollout. Only 3 million of the 20 million doses that were to be administered by the end of December were actually administered. But even if this disorganization and incompetence are somehow overcome in the coming months—a highly unlikely prospect given the disastrous state of the profit-driven American health care industry—the impact on the accelerating rate of mortality will be limited. “Even with a vaccine,” the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation warned in December, “if states do not act to bring current surges under control, the death toll could reach 770,000 by April 1.” But neither the states nor the federal government will take the actions that are required to control, let alone prevent, the ongoing and disastrous spread of the virus and loss of life.

10. President-elect Joe Biden has predicted that “a very dark winter” lies ahead. But confronted with an unprecedented social catastrophe, the only measure that he proposes to take during his first 100 days in office is to issue a call for all Americans to wear face masks. At this stage in the pandemic, Biden’s policy can be compared to attempting to contain the gale force winds of a hurricane with butterfly nets. Biden’s pathetic proposal epitomizes the capitalist oligarchy’s contempt for human life.

11. The ruling class refuses to implement policies that must be taken to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus: that is, the shutdown of all nonessential workplaces, the closing of schools and the emergency provision of the financial support necessary to sustain the population until the crisis is overcome. The self-serving claims that nothing could have been done to save lives is contradicted by China’s ability—through a stringent program of testing, contact tracing and selective lockdowns—to rapidly contain the spread of the virus and keep total deaths to less than 5,000.

12. The fact that the impact of the pandemic has been most severe in the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and, especially, the United States—the home of the richest capitalist ruling class and the center of world imperialism—testifies to the historical obsolescence of a socioeconomic system based on the nation-state system, private ownership of the means of production and the drive for profit through the exploitation of human labor power. From the earliest stages of the

outbreak, the ruling classes rejected all measures, however necessary from the standpoint of saving lives, that conflicted either with their accumulation of personal wealth or the global geopolitical interests of their national states.

13. Considerations of national security, inter-imperialist conflicts and the global balance of power, and the striving of transnational corporations (which remain tied to the existing national states) for competitive advantage precluded from the start any globally coordinated and scientifically guided response to the pandemic. Rather than fostering unity in the face of a common threat to human life, the pandemic has intensified the antagonisms between capitalist national states. The *Strategic Survey of 2020*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, acknowledges that “even as the virus spread to almost every country, divisions between them deepened.” The IISS report continues:

By mid-2020, relations between the United States, Europe and China had all but fallen to their lowest point in decades. Russian-Western relations remained locked in suspicion. Sino-Indian tensions flared in deadly border clashes. Institutions, laws and norms of cooperation suffered multiple setbacks. The US denounced or withdrew from several organizations and treaties, including the World Health Organization. The United Kingdom left the European Union. China altered the special status of Hong Kong.

14. In an extraordinarily pessimistic assessment of the world situation, the *Strategic Survey* explains:

Increasingly, we are entering an age of “tolerance warfare,” which the IISS defines as the “constant effort to test the tolerances for different forms of intervention against settled states.” Sometimes tolerance warfare is conducted overtly and is in effect “declared.” But often it is executed through foreign networks or private partners, especially in the theatres of operation that are adjacent to the power executing this technique. A favoured tool of actors who wish to change the status quo, tolerance warfare is difficult to counter because it generates conflict below the threshold of traditional war, outside the confines of established laws, yet above the acceptable limits of stability...

The COVID-19 pandemic has barely allowed for a strategic pause in these trends. National resilience and self-sufficiency are being prized as key goals. Reputation is being resurrected as an important element of national power.

15. In this highly fraught situation, the IISS warns, “Anarchy seems so often only a few mistakes away.”

The characteristics of warfare, the shape of conflicts, the strategies employed, the actors engaged and the weapons used are all changing rapidly. The nature of power that states, companies and transnational actors deploy digitally and economically is altering at speed. Regional orders are mutating. The interplay of norms, guidelines, standards, regulations and laws that govern international society is in flux. International society remains insufficiently regulated and is almost becoming an “ungoverned space.”

16. What the IISS describes as “tolerance warfare” can easily escalate into full-scale war, with the very real danger of a nuclear exchange. The ceaseless US denunciations of Russia and China, combined with increasingly provocative military maneuvers, have a fatal political logic. This danger is intensified by the need of the ruling class to direct internal social pressure outwards, that is, away from domestic class conflict and toward war.

17. As they have pursued relentlessly their global geopolitical interests, the capitalist elites have rejected any response to the pandemic that conflicts with corporate profit interests and the drive for the accumulation of private wealth. The staggering rise in share values on Wall Street between March and December 2020 and the mounting death toll were parallel and complementary phenomena. The policies that made capitalist enrichment possible also made mass death inevitable. As early as January 2020, a decision was made by the ruling classes of the United States and Europe to prioritize the interests of the financial markets over the saving of lives. As Donald Trump later admitted in his interview with the journalist Bob Woodward, the danger posed by the pandemic was concealed from the public, while plans were worked out behind the scenes to organize, under the aegis of the CARES Act, a multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and major corporations.

18. Since the beginning of 2020, the wealth of the world’s richest 500 people has increased by approximately \$1.8 trillion, to a total of \$7.6 trillion. Five of these pandemic profiteers now have more than \$100 billion each, including Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos (\$190 billion) and Tesla CEO Elon Musk (\$170 billion). Combined, these two individuals increased their wealth by \$217 billion in 2020.

19. The staggering increase in the wealth of the ruling stratum has depended entirely on the limitless transfer by the Federal Reserve of digitally-manufactured money—“fictitious capital” totally unrelated to the production of real value—to the financial markets. This has unleashed an orgy of speculation that has driven the price of speculative assets—and the wealth of those who own them—to stratospheric heights. The price of the cryptocurrency bitcoin—money that has no physical existence outside the realm of cyberspace—rose 360 percent in 2020, from \$7,194 to \$34,000. Between the Christmas and New Year holidays, its market price has almost doubled. Such gifts to the rich, as Edward Luce wryly commented in a column published during the New Year weekend, come “courtesy of the US Federal Reserve... the free money gusher has lifted all asset prices.”

20. But the burden of the Federal Reserve’s policy falls on the working class. The massive accumulation of state deficits and corporate debt required to finance the bailout demands the continued inflow of corporate revenues and high levels of profitability. Without this inflow, the speculative bubble and the wealth that depends on it cannot be sustained. This economic imperative can be met only through the uninterrupted exploitation of the labor power of the working class. Just as soldiers in World War I had to be kept in the trenches and forced into battle against machine-gun fire and poison gas, workers today must be kept in the factories and work sites despite the uncontrolled spread of the virus. And for parents to be able to show up at their jobs, schools must be kept open, despite the fact that children are prime vectors for the transmission of the COVID-19 virus to adults.

21. These are the socially criminal calculations that underlie the implementation of the program of “herd immunity,” that is, accepting, to the point of advocating, the uncontrolled spread of the virus. Eventually, according to the advocates of this policy, such a large portion of the population will be infected with the COVID-19 virus that “herd immunity” will be achieved.

22. This policy was implemented immediately with much fanfare by Sweden, and then—after the bailouts had been put in place in late March 2020—transferred to the rest of Europe and the United States. This sociopathic policy was justified by claiming that the use of lockdowns and

school closings to stop the spread of the virus would incur unbearable financial costs. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, in a column praising the example set by Sweden, popularized the slogan, “The cure cannot be worse than the disease.” The real meaning of this cynical tag line is that saving human lives should not come at the expense of corporate profits and Wall Street share values.

23. The political corollary of the economic policy of the ruling class has been the ever-more overt turn toward the promotion of fascist movements, the dismantling of the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy, and efforts to establish authoritarian regimes. In his conspiracy to overthrow the Constitution and establish a presidential dictatorship, Donald Trump is not an isolated psychopath striving to fulfill his personal Hitlerian ambitions. The fact that his repudiation of the results of the 2020 election is openly supported by a large section of the Republican Party, including members of Congress, indicates the extent to which powerful elements within the ruling class are prepared to break with the Constitution and back the creation of an authoritarian regime.

24. Trump’s relentless denunciations of “the radical left” and socialism, combined with his encouragement of fascist gangs, appeal to the fears within the oligarchy that the development of a mass popular movement against social inequality is not merely possible, but inevitable and imminent. Trump’s rhetoric and actions conform to a political strategy that the noted left-wing historian Arno J. Mayer identified with the preparation of a *preemptive counterrevolution*:

In an atmosphere heavy with suspicion, uncertainty and abeyant violence, counterrevolutionary leaders try to convince embattled and traumatized elites that it is merely a matter of time until revolutionaries will again exploit the situation for their purposes. But rather than apply themselves to cooling the overheated atmosphere, they do their best to inflame it further. They do so in order to buttress their claim that revolution is imminent, while at the same time looking for, if not precipitating, confrontations in which to demonstrate their capacity to put down real or alleged revolutionaries. [*Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870–1956: An Analytic Framework* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 86]

25. This analysis provides the necessary historical perspective for understanding the political calculations behind Trump’s attacks on the anti-police violence protests of the past year and his brutal instigation of the state killing of the alleged Antifa supporter Michael Reinhoehl on September 3, 2020.

26. The actions of the Trump regime confirm the warnings of the International Committee, whose evaluation of the political significance of his accession to power was based on a Marxist analysis of the social foundations of capitalist rule in the United States. In its New Year statement published almost exactly four years ago, on January 3, 2017, just two weeks before Trump’s inauguration, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned:

The election of Donald Trump has exposed, in all its disgusting nakedness, the reality of oligarchic rule in the United State. It must be stressed, however, that Trump is not some sort of monstrous interloper into what had been, until Election Day 2016, a flawed but essentially decent society. Trump—the product of the criminal and diseased couplings of the real estate, finance, gambling and entertainment industries—is the genuine face of the American ruling class.

The incoming Trump administration, in its aims as in its personnel, has the character of an insurrection of the oligarchy. As a doomed social class approaches its end, its efforts to withstand the tides of history not infrequently assume the form of an attempt to reverse what it perceives as the longstanding erosion of its power and privilege. It seeks to return conditions to the way they once were (or as it imagines they were) before the inexorable forces of economic and social change began gnawing away at the foundations of its rule.

27. The inauguration of Joseph Biden as president on January 20—assuming that Trump’s efforts to stage a coup d’état do not succeed—will in no significant way halt, let alone reverse, the breakdown of American democracy. The movement toward authoritarianism is driven not by personalities but by 1) the socioeconomic contradictions of American capitalism, which find their most malignant expression in extreme levels of social inequality; and 2) the inherent and uncontrollable drive by American imperialism, however terrible the consequences, to reverse the erosion of its geopolitical position and reestablish its global hegemony.

28. Neither of these essential elements of American capitalist rule—ever greater levels of social inequality and the unrestrained global assertion of the interests of the US as the preeminent imperialist power—are compatible with democracy. The defense of inequality against growing domestic protest and the growth of class struggle requires the resort to police state measures. The struggle to maintain global supremacy requires the endless and limitless diversion of economic resources to the preparation and waging of war. These are the imperatives that will determine the policies of the Biden government, both within the United States and internationally.

29. But social necessity finds expression not only in the policies of the ruling class. It also brings about immense changes in mass consciousness. The tragedy of 2020, which continues into 2021, has profoundly and irreversibly undermined the confidence of the working class in the capitalist order. The basic lesson of the pandemic is that it is possible to defend the interests of the working class only through a struggle against the capitalist system. Not only will there be mounting resistance to the policies of herd immunity, there will be growing demands for a change in the existing structures of society. The leftward shift in mass consciousness and the intensification of class struggle will be clear indications of the initial development of a pre-revolutionary situation.

30. The working class has not failed to notice that the exponential rise in the rate of death has proceeded in tandem with an exponential rise in share values on Wall Street and other major stock exchanges. As thousands have gasped for air and suffered lonely deaths in overcrowded intensive care units, deprived of even the comfort of a final embrace and tender words from their loved ones, the class of pandemic profiteers has celebrated its socially destructive self-enrichment. Alongside the obscene accumulation of private wealth, there is a corresponding accumulation of social outrage.

31. Outrage will lead to the eruption of class struggle. This development has been anticipated and encouraged by the efforts of the Socialist Equality Parties, affiliated with the International Committee of the Fourth International, to initiate the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, outside of the control of the official trade unions, which are nothing other than appendages of corporate management dedicated to suppressing every effort of workers to resist capitalist exploitation.

32. The working class is being drawn into the maelstrom of revolutionary struggle. Just as the wealth and privileges of the European aristocrats and North American slave owners provoked demands for the overthrow of the economic and social relations upon which the wealth and

power of the old ruling classes were based, the modern globalized world will not endlessly tolerate the concentration of social wealth among a small capitalist elite. The demand for the expropriation of the wealth of the oligarchs and the socialist reorganization of the world economy in the interests of humanity arises necessarily out of this crisis. The recognition of the objective logic of this social process is the real foundation of the political perspective and practice of the world Trotskyist movement.

33. The development of a socialist movement in the working class is by its very nature an international struggle. The pandemic has exposed in the most direct way the fact that every major problem confronting mankind is a global problem and requires a global solution. The same indifference to life, the same incompetence and disorganization, the same ruthless subordination of social need to private wealth and geopolitical interests characterize the response of the ruling class to every problem, whether it is climate change, world war or mass poverty.

34. The unification of the international working class in a common struggle against capitalism requires opposition to all efforts to divide workers, whether through the nationalism of the far-right or the race-fixed identity politics of the pseudo-left. Over the past year, the Democratic Party and the *New York Times* have spearheaded a relentless campaign to promote racial divisions, claiming that the fundamental division in the United States is between “white America” and “black America,” not between the working class and the capitalist class. This is the reactionary politics of the upper-middle class, fighting not for social equality, but for a more favorable distribution of wealth and privilege within the top 10 percent of the population.

35. The promotion of racialist politics is one of the methods through which the ruling class seeks to keep social opposition within the framework of the Democratic Party. This is the central political lesson that arises out of the mass protests against police murder that erupted in the spring of 2020 and spread throughout the United States and internationally. The Democrats and their auxiliary organizations within the pseudo-left channeled anger over the epidemic of police violence, which impacts workers and youth of all races, behind the denunciation of “white privilege.” The racialist falsification of history, initiated by the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, was intensified through a reactionary campaign to dismantle the statues of leaders of the two bourgeois-democratic revolutions in the United States: the American Revolution and the Civil War.

36. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, supported by the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations, played once again a reactionary and duplicitous role in diverting opposition to capitalism behind the Democratic Party. In the 2020 elections, as in the 2016 elections, Sanders said he was leading a “political revolution,” only to throw his support behind the right-wing candidate of the Democratic Party establishment. The claims of Sanders and others that a Biden administration would create “space” for the implementation of social reforms have been refuted even in advance of Biden’s taking office. He has assembled a right-wing cabinet, issued endless calls for “unity,” and pledged to work with his “Republican colleagues”—the same individuals who have supported Trump’s attempt to steal the election and establish an anti-Constitutional presidential dictatorship.

37. The defense of democratic rights and the fight against fascism, in the United States and internationally, are inextricably connected to the independent mobilization of the working class in the fight for socialism. A central lesson of 2020 is that, to the extent that no genuinely progressive outlet is found to respond to the crisis of capitalism, all the horrors of the 20th century will reemerge in even more bloody and brutal forms.

38. Over the past year, the leadership of the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, has demonstrated in practice the strength of its historical foundations and the power of the Marxist method. From the earliest stages of the pandemic, the ICFI

warned about the global danger, exposed the conspiracies of the ruling elites, and advanced a program and perspective for the working class to stop the deadly virus. There is not a single publication in the world whose coverage of the pandemic compares to that of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

39. On February 28, when global deaths stood at less than 3,000 and there were as yet no recorded deaths in the United States, the ICFI issued an urgent call for an emergency global response to the pandemic. While the ruling class was downplaying the danger and delaying action, the ICFI called for the mobilization of the world’s scientific, technical and social resources to combat the deadly threat. On March 17, when US deaths had just passed 100, the National Committee of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States published a “Program of Action for the Working Class,” which included a demand for the immediate closure of schools and non-essential production, with full income for workers affected. These are only two of the countless statements and articles that provide a historical record of the socialist programmatic and political alternative to the ruling class policy of mass death and social devastation.

40. Just as World War I demonstrated the farsightedness of the Bolshevik Party, so the present crisis has demonstrated the historic stature of the contemporary Trotskyist movement. There is no doubt that if the policies fought for by the ICFI had been implemented, hundreds of thousands of lives would have been saved.

41. The duration of a pre-revolutionary situation—that is, the length of the transition to a direct struggle for power—cannot be predicted in advance. Apart from participation in the struggles of the working class, speculation about the tempo of events can have only an abstract and metaphysical character. The challenge that confronts the socialist movement, in the context of the objective crisis of capitalism and the growth of class struggle, is to raise the class consciousness of the workers and impart to their movement a socialist direction.

42. But this task does not consist simply of giving advice to workers from the outside. The success of the struggle for socialism depends upon establishing a powerful presence of the Socialist Equality Party in the factories, schools and job sites of every section of the working class. Young people in the International Youth and Students for Social Equality will play a critical role in expanding the presence of the SEP in the working class.

43. The social and political conditions are ripe for the building of a powerful international movement of the working class. We call on readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to become active in the fight for socialism, join the Socialist Equality Party and build the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution.



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