

One year of the COVID-19 pandemic: A disaster caused by capitalism

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party
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Today marks one year since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a global pandemic.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus issued the declaration on March 11, 2020, when there were 118,000 reported cases in 14 countries worldwide and 4,291 deaths. “WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock,” he said, “and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction.” He repeated calls for “countries to take urgent and aggressive action. We have rung the alarm bell loud and clear.”

With few exceptions—of which China is the most notable—the governments of the major capitalist countries rejected the warnings of scientists. They did not take aggressive action and the alarm bells went unheeded. Over the past 12 months, the number of global cases rose from 118,000 to more than 118 million. The death toll increased from 4,000 to 2.6 million, including 540,000 in the US, 270,000 in Brazil, 191,000 in Mexico, 158,000 in India, 125,000 in the UK and 100,000 in Italy.

The economic toll on the working class has been devastating. The International Labour Organization estimates that the world lost the equivalent of 255 million jobs in 2020, nearly four times the impact of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. Countless small businesses have been wiped out. Cultural life has been devastated throughout the world.

US President Joe Biden will deliver a prime time address tonight on the occasion of the one-year anniversary of the pandemic. He will no doubt pronounce the obligatory and insincere words about the tragic loss of life over the past twelve months, without any serious examination of why this catastrophe happened and why it is continuing. According to White House officials, he will speak of the coming return of a “sense of normalcy.”

There will, however, be no return to “normalcy.” The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a devastating indictment not only of the actions of particular governments,

but of the entire social and economic order based on capitalism. It will have the most far-reaching and revolutionary consequences.

The impact of the pandemic is the product of decisions to subordinate human life to the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy. The urgent public health measures necessary to save lives encountered at every point the ferocious opposition of the capitalist ruling elites.

The critical period of January-March 2020 was devoted to the systematic suppression of information on the danger that the pandemic posed. Only after growing numbers of workers in the United States and Europe refused to enter unsafe auto plants and other job sites were limited lockdowns implemented.

These actions were never part of any serious internationally coordinated strategy. Rather, the haphazard national and local responses were aimed at buying time for the ruling class to implement, for the second time since 2008, a massive bailout of the rich. In the United States, the Federal Reserve funneled \$4 trillion into the markets, sanctioned by the CARES Act, passed on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis in late March of last year. Similar measures were adopted by central banks throughout the world.

Once the interests of the ruling class were secured, governments orchestrated a coordinated campaign to reopen closed factories and schools. The “herd immunity” strategy, pioneered in Sweden, became, de facto, the policy of the entire ruling class. Under the slogan of “the cure can’t be worse than the disease,” the most basic measures to stop the spread of the virus were systematically eliminated.

While millions of people contracted the virus, the financial markets celebrated the most rapid rise in share values in history. One figure sums up the social dynamic: Since the beginning of the pandemic one year ago, US billionaires have increased their wealth by \$1.4 trillion. A new layer of “pandemic profiteers” prospered amidst death and suffering.

One year after the official declaration of a pandemic, COVID-19 continues to rage throughout the world. Even

with the initial production of a vaccine, its chaotic distribution, hampered by the interests of competing nation-states, becomes itself a factor in the crisis. Only four percent of the world's population has received even one dose of the vaccine, and even in many of the most developed countries the percentage of the population that has been fully vaccinated remains in the single digits.

In Germany, the supposed model of capitalist efficiency, only 3.1 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, in Spain and France, 3.0 percent, in Italy, 2.9 percent, and in Canada, 1.6 percent.

Despite warnings of a new surge, driven by more contagious variants, governments around the world are abandoning any remaining measures to contain the pandemic. Yesterday, the US state of Texas removed all restraints on economic activity, while the Biden administration is spearheading the campaign to reopen schools as quickly as possible.

The most decisive refutation of the claims that nothing could have been done is the record of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Based on publicly available information, the WSWS, the organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International, issued a series of statements one year ago warning of what was to come and elaborating the necessary programmatic response.

On March 13, two days after the official declaration of a pandemic, the WSWS indicted the response of the ruling class. "Precious time was wasted as the global pandemic gathered fatal momentum," the WSWS stated.

Insisting that "the needs of the working people of the world must take absolute and unconditional priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth accumulation," the WSWS demanded emergency measures, including an internationally coordinated mobilization of social resources and the shutdown of non-essential production, with full income for all workers.

If these policies had been implemented, countless lives could have been saved.

The fight against the pandemic was never solely a medical issue. The containment of the pandemic cannot be achieved apart from a struggle against the capitalist system.

As with every crisis of this character, the pandemic has profoundly altered the entire political situation. It has enormously accelerated the far-reaching decay of democratic forms of rule. The growth of fascism internationally is directly connected to the homicidal politics of the ruling elites. The January 6 insurrection in Washington was the noxious product not simply of Trump and his co-conspirators, but the reality of class rule.

The ruling class, moreover, confronting a massive social crisis at home and growing anger in the working class, is

turning ever more openly to military conflict as a way out. In its first two months in office, the Biden administration has made as a central priority the intensification of its aggressive provocations in the Middle East and against Russia and China.

All the official institutions of capitalist society stand exposed. Governments, whether headed by the extreme right or the supposed "left," have adopted the same basic policy. In the United States, there has not been a single congressional hearing or even serious media investigation into the sources of the catastrophe or who was responsible. The corporatist trade unions, in reality instruments of management, have done everything they can to suppress opposition and enforce the policy of the ruling class.

As with World War I, the pandemic is generating a profound social and political radicalization of an entire generation of workers and youth. Even as Biden proclaims a return to "normalcy," there is mounting opposition among educators to the efforts to reopen schools, and in the entire working class to the homicidal policy that the ruling class insists must continue.

And as disastrous as the pandemic is, it portends further and even deeper crises—climate change, even worse and deadlier pandemics, the threat of nuclear war—stemming from the same fundamental causes as the failure to contain the pandemic.

The pandemic proves the necessity of the abolition of the capitalist nation-state system. It shows that the defense of the most vital interests of society is inseparable from the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and an end to private ownership of the means of production. It makes clear the urgent necessity for a scientifically-managed, rationally-organized and democratically-controlled world economy.

The fight for socialism is a global struggle for a society that prioritizes life over profit, human need over the wealth of the oligarchs and international collaboration over national conflict.



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