

Forward to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!

Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International
23 April 2021

May Day 2021 will mark the second year in which the international day of working class solidarity is held under conditions of a global pandemic. The International Committee of the Fourth International will mark this day with an Online Rally. It will issue a call for the formation of the **International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)**.

The ICFI and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are advancing this initiative to begin and develop a global counteroffensive of the working class against the homicidal policies of the governments controlled by the capitalist ruling class, which are responsible for the worldwide catastrophe.

The formation of the IWA-RFC is a critically necessary response to a global crisis that has exacted a terrible toll in human life. When May Day was observed in 2020, the global death toll stood at just under 250,000. It is now 12 times that number, at more than 3,000,000.

The death toll in individual countries and regions is staggering. More than 850,000 people have died in North America, including more than 583,000 in the United States and 213,000 in Mexico. In South America, 640,000 people have died, with more than half, 350,000, in Brazil.

One million lives have been lost in Europe, including 130,000 in the UK, 120,000 in Italy, 110,000 in Russia, 100,000 in France and 80,000 in Germany. In Asia, the death toll is approaching 500,000, led by India with nearly 200,000 victims, Iran with 70,000, Indonesia with 44,000 and Turkey with 37,000.

More than 120,000 have died in Africa, with nearly half of the dead in South Africa.

Beyond the immediate death toll, the long-term consequences for those who have survived are colossal. Nearly 150 million people have been infected worldwide, with millions suffering with persistent symptoms long after they have nominally recovered. According to one recent study, those who have been infected but were not hospitalized have a 60 percent greater risk of death within the next six months than those who were not infected.

Nearly a year and a half into the pandemic, the virus is raging throughout the world. Fueled by the spread of new and more contagious strains of the virus, the average number of new cases worldwide is at its highest level ever.

In India, daily new cases have surged to more than a quarter of a million people. The health care systems of major cities are breaking down, and crematoriums are overwhelmed as the dead pile up. In Brazil, daily new cases and new deaths are at record levels. In Iran, an initial epicenter of the pandemic, new infections are at far higher levels than at any point since the virus first emerged.

The United States is the richest and most powerful of all the imperialist countries. But despite its wealth and its control of the most advanced technologies, the pandemic has exposed the reactionary backwardness of its political system and social organization. From its earliest stages, the response of the United States to the pandemic has been determined—first,

foremost and always—by the economic interests of the ruling oligarchy. Government policy—first under Trump and now under Biden—has been directed not toward the eradication of the coronavirus, but toward the perpetuation of the Wall Street boom and the advancement of American imperialism's drive for global hegemony.

The result of market-driven policies is a staggering rise in the annual rate of deaths. The number of “excess deaths” in 2020 is greater than that incurred during the 1918 Flu Pandemic. Despite all the advances in science and technology in the course of a century, more Americans will die in the COVID-19 pandemic than during the pandemic of 1918-19.

At nearly 600,000 dead in the US, the toll from the virus is rapidly approaching the number of soldiers killed in the Civil War, the deadliest conflict in American history. More than 70,000 new cases are reported every day, with nearly 750 new deaths. Many states, particularly in the industrial Midwest, are in the midst of a surge of cases, with outbreaks centered in schools, child care facilities and factories.

The distribution of the vaccine is as uncoordinated and haphazard as every other aspect of the ruling class response to the pandemic. Even in many of the advanced capitalist countries, the percentage of those who have been fully vaccinated is in the single digits. In many parts of the world, a vaccine will not be broadly available for months or even years. The uncontrolled spread of the virus means that new variants are constantly emerging, undermining the vaccination efforts everywhere.

The ruling class response to the pandemic

The virus is a biological phenomenon, but the response by governments throughout the world has been determined by political calculations and class interests. All those who hold power—the governments and political parties, the banks and corporations, the markets and the media—bear the full weight of responsibility for what has happened.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the ruling class has refused to take the measures necessary to stop its spread—mass testing and contact tracing, the shutdown of nonessential production and schools, the provision of full income to workers and real assistance to small businesses. Its concern was not the impact of the pandemic on the health of millions, but the financial impact of the measures required to save lives on the profits of the corporations and the wealth of the rich.

Millions of lives have been lost, but billions of dollars have been accumulated. For the working class, the pandemic has been a human tragedy. For the ruling elites, it has been a financial bonanza.

The collective wealth of the world's billionaires exploded 60 percent from last year, from \$8 trillion to more than \$13.1 trillion. The massive growth of debt will be paid for through an enormous intensification of the exploitation of the working class.

In the course of the past 16 months, it has become absolutely clear that the response of capitalist governments to the pandemic is strictly determined by economic and geopolitical considerations. In justifying its policies of “malign neglect,” the American ruling class differs from others only in the extent of its cynicism and deceit. In its rationalization of its criminal negligence, the US government can count on the collaboration of the media.

Rejecting scientifically guided and realizable proposals for the global eradication of the COVID-19 virus, capitalist policy asserts that the pandemic must be accepted as a perpetual condition, an inescapable reality that the working class has to “live with,” or, more accurately, die with. In the media, reports of daily deaths and the rise of new cases have receded into the background. The population is to be desensitized to mass death and human misery and encouraged to adopt a mood of passivity and fatalism.

To the extent that its policy encounters opposition in the working class, the response of the ruling elites is to resort to repression and violence. Outright fascists and neo-Nazis are being mobilized around the banner of opposition to any restraint on business activity. Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil are naked expressions of an international phenomenon. The declaration of a Sri Lankan minister that the president should be “more like Hitler” expresses the authoritarian tendencies of the ruling elite in every country.

And even amid mass death and social misery, the United States is intensifying its campaign against Russia and China. The latest military budget, approaching \$1 trillion, is the largest in history. The past year has witnessed a dangerous escalation of imperialist provocations against Russia and China. The American media, in particular, has attempted to incite popular hatred against China with entirely fabricated claims that the pandemic was caused by a virus manufactured in a “Wuhan lab.” This lie has been supplemented by a vicious propaganda campaign accusing the Chinese government of carrying out genocide against the Uyghur people.

The deliberate incitement of anti-Russian and anti-Chinese hatred is obviously directed toward legitimizing American and European preparations for war in pursuit of global imperialist interests. However, such propaganda and the military conflicts to which they lead serve an additional critical purpose: the deflection of growing domestic popular anger away from national governments and outward toward “foreign enemies.” Governments will exploit the danger of war to escalate domestic political repression of mounting internal social opposition.

For a counteroffensive of the international working class!

The pandemic is a world historical event that will reverberate for decades to come. In its impact, the pandemic can be compared to World War I. When the war broke out in July 1914, following the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, soldiers went off to the battlefield with the expectation that they would be home by Christmas. But the war continued, month after month, year after year. The death toll climbed from the thousands to the tens of thousands and then to the millions. The savage barbarity dragged on because it served the geopolitical interests of the capitalist powers and the profit interests of the war profiteers. It was brought to an end only through the intervention of the working class, culminating in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

As with the war, so too with the pandemic. The pandemic will continue until there is a conscious and independent intervention of the working class to remove control of the management and direction of the response to the virus from the capitalist ruling elites and into its own hands.

Already, workers have begun to fight back, from autoworkers, health

care workers and educators in the US and Europe, to oil and railway workers in Brazil, to public transport workers in India. There is a growing understanding in the working class that the pandemic will not be stopped without emergency measures to implement lockdowns and school closures.

Every effort of the working class to resist the policies of the ruling elite, however, comes into conflict with all of the institutions of the state and the entire framework of official politics. Whether explicitly right-wing or nominally “left,” the official parties and political organizations in every major capitalist country have rejected the measures demanded by scientists and public health officials to stop the pandemic.

As for the official trade unions, far from organizing opposition to the policies of the ruling class, they have helped implement them. These organizations are “unions” only in name. In actual practice, they long ago abandoned any defense of the interests of the workers they claim to represent and now function as co-conspirators of corporate management and the state.

While the corporatist degeneration of the unions and their complete integration into the framework of management and the state is perhaps most grotesque in the United States, the same conditions prevail in every country. There has not been a single struggle waged by the unions against the ruling class policy of “herd immunity” and massive handouts to the rich.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions. For this purpose, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are initiating the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.

It will be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle to demand protection for workers, the shutdown of unsafe facilities and nonessential production, and other emergency measures that are necessary to stop the spread of the virus.

The ICFI is initiating the formation of this alliance on a global scale, which is the only way that the pandemic can be fought. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, with the political assistance of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties, will strive to unify workers in a common worldwide struggle, opposing every effort by capitalist governments and the reactionary proponents of the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics to split up the working class into warring factions.

Naturally, conditions confronting workers vary from region to region and country to country, and these may affect the choice of tactics. But it is undeniably true, in all countries, that the existing bureaucratized trade unions function as an institutionalized police force, determined to protect the corporate and financial interests of the ruling elites and their governments against growing popular resistance.

New pathways for mass struggle must be created. More than 80 years ago, at a point in history when the degeneration of the existing trade union organizations was far less advanced than today, Leon Trotsky—the greatest

strategist of world socialist revolution—wrote that the task of the Fourth International was “to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions.”

The fight to develop the network of globally interconnected rank-and-file committees is not limited to factories, schools and workplaces where trade unions exist. In actual fact, the overwhelming majority of present-day work sites are not unionized. This social fact means that rank-and-file committees will emerge as the initial and sole form of practical organization in innumerable work locations.

The development of these committees will inevitably attract the support of broader sections of the working class, including the youth and the unemployed.

This is an international struggle. The emergence of new variants where the pandemic is spreading, potentially resistant to vaccines, demonstrates that the pandemic cannot be eradicated in any single country unless it is eradicated globally. National competition between the capitalist powers has blocked a globally coordinated response to the pandemic. Now the life-saving vaccine is being hoarded by the dominant capitalist countries and used as an instrument in their geopolitical intrigues.

The fight for socialism

The International Committee of the Fourth International advances the proposal for the formation of the IWA-RFC within the framework of the perspective of world socialist revolution.

The development of a network of workers committees is absolutely essential. It is not, however, a substitute for the building of the revolutionary party. Action is required, but serious action must be based on program and principles. Sustaining and developing a network of independent organizations requires the development of a socialist leadership in the working class.

Just as the spread of the pandemic is inseparable from the enrichment of the financial oligarchy, the ending of the pandemic is inseparable from the expropriation of the oligarchs. The vast wealth piled up by the financial elite must be used to finance emergency measures to save millions of lives.

The fight against the pandemic, and against war, inequality, exploitation and dictatorship, is a fight against the entire capitalist social and economic order. Workers of all countries must be united in a common political offensive to take power, expropriate the oligarchs, and establish a socialist society based on the rational, scientific and democratic control of production for the purpose of serving social need, not private profit.

The International Committee of the Fourth International calls on workers throughout the world: Take up this fight! Develop rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace!



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