

May Day 2021 and the global class struggle

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We are publishing here the opening report delivered by David North to the 2021 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 1. North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWWS and the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US.

In opening this May Day Rally, I am honored to extend the greetings of the International Committee of the Fourth International to the worldwide audience that is participating in this historic holiday's affirmation of the global solidarity of the working class.

Under the conditions that presently prevail, it is not possible to describe the observation of May Day 2021 as a "celebration." The scale of the suffering during the past year, which continues to this very date, has been too great. Humanity is paying a terrible price for the criminal response of the most powerful capitalist regimes to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The prioritization of the geopolitical objectives of the major imperialist powers, the relentless drive for corporate profits and the insatiable greed of the capitalist oligarchs for obscene levels of personal wealth have precluded the implementation of a scientifically directed and internationally coordinated response to the global pandemic.

The consequences of sociopathic policies pursued by capitalist governments are exposed by the staggering toll in human life.

Exactly one year ago, on May 1, 2020, the total global pandemic death toll had reached 240,000. Today, the number of people who have died stands at almost 3,200,000—a more than 13-fold increase.

Of that total number, Europe accounts for 1,015,000 victims. In North America, 861,000 people have died. In South America, the death toll stands at 670,000. In Asia, 520,000 lives have been lost. And in Africa, the official number of victims is given as 122,000.

Leading the world in deaths is the United States, the world's richest and most powerful country, and the home of the greatest number of billionaires. On this date one year ago, the number of Americans who had succumbed to the pandemic stood at 65,000. Within the space of 12 months, the number of American victims has reached 590,000.

This figure already surpasses the total combined number of US soldiers who were killed in all the wars waged by the United States since the outbreak of the Spanish-American War 123 years ago. By mid-autumn 2021, if not sooner, the number of pandemic deaths will have exceeded the loss of life incurred during the country's bloodiest conflict—the four-year Civil War of 1861–65.

According to an analysis of mortality data conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from March 2020 until February 20, 2021, there were 574,000 more Americans who died than would be expected in a typical year.

The American tragedy is—as has already been shown by the review of the regional statistics—part of a global catastrophe. In Brazil the death toll has passed 400,000. In Mexico the number of dead is approaching 220,000. In Britain 127,000 people have died. In Russia the pandemic has claimed 110,000 lives; in France, 105,000; in Germany, 85,000; in Spain, 80,000; and in Turkey, 40,000.

As we meet, the attention of the world is concentrated on the horrifying

impact of the pandemic in India, where the number of victims has passed 210,000 and is climbing by the thousands each day. This unfolding tragedy underscores the indisputable fact that there is no national solution to what is, in fact, a global crisis.

As long as the COVID-19 virus spreads through unprotected populations in one or another country or region, and thus replicating and mutating, it will continue to exact a terrible toll in human life. In the coming months the poorest countries will bear the brunt of the crisis. As a Harvard physician stated in an interview posted Friday in the *Financial Times*, the eruption of the pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa is now only a matter of time.

Moreover, despite reassurances that vaccinations will protect the wealthy countries from the ravages inflicted by the virus in those countries deprived of the necessary supplies of vaccines, epidemiologists are warning against unwarranted and dangerous complacency.

The fact is that the pandemic is not a transient event, which will merely fade away and allow a return to the pre-pandemic status quo. Far from approaching the end of the crisis, the pandemic has profoundly destabilized the entire world capitalist system. Not only is the world not approaching the end of the pandemic, or even the beginning of the end, what initially began as a medical crisis has metastasized into a fundamental economic, social and political crisis of the entire world capitalist order.

Last year, at the very beginning of the pandemic, the *World Socialist Web Site*—the organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International—defined it as a historical "trigger event," comparable to World War I. The sudden eruption of war—sparked by what at first seemed to be no more than a minor political incident in the Balkans—assumed dimensions that very few, apart from a small number of isolated Marxist revolutionary internationalists, had imagined possible in August 1914.

When the war first erupted, the young men of Europe went off to the fight, amidst widespread jubilation, confident that they would be back home in time to celebrate Christmas with their families. That did not happen. Hundreds of thousands of those young men, full of enthusiasm in August 1914, were dead by December. And the war went on and on, into 1915 and 1916 and 1917, drenching the battlefields of Europe, on both the eastern and western fronts, with the blood of millions of soldiers.

The war unfolded with a terrible momentum. Death became normalized. Governments and the military commanders began to refer to human beings as "human material," as abstract "things" to be expended as required by the logic of the conflict. The war could not be ended, despite its horrors, because the geopolitical and economic interests of the ruling classes of the warring capitalist powers did not allow for a negotiated settlement.

For the war to end, the direction of society had to be taken out of the hands of the capitalist rulers. That is, a force greater than the armies commanded by the governments of the day had to be mobilized. That was the working class of all the warring countries. Armed with a revolutionary socialist program, the international working class had to wage war on war. That was the perspective of Lenin and Trotsky. In September 1915, a small group of antiwar socialists met in Zimmerwald, Switzerland.

Trotsky was chosen, at the conclusion of a four-day conference, to write a Manifesto addressed to the working class.

This incomparable political genius and revolutionary fighter found the appropriate words with which to summon the workers of Europe.

The war has lasted for more than a year. Millions of corpses lie upon the battlefields; millions of men have been crippled for life. Europe has become a gigantic human slaughterhouse. All science, the work of many generations, is devoted to destruction. The most savage barbarity is celebrating its triumph over everything that was previously the pride of mankind.

Whatever may be the truth about the immediate responsibility for the outbreak of the war, one thing is certain: the war that has occasioned this chaos is the outcome of Imperialism, of the endeavors of the capitalist classes of every nation to satisfy their greed for profit by the exploitation of human labor and of the treasures of Nature. ...

As the war proceeds, its real driving forces become apparent in all their baseness. Piece by piece the veil which has hidden the meaning of this world catastrophe from the understanding of the peoples is falling down.

Within just 18 months, in February 1917, revolution erupted in Russia. Eight months later, in October of that year, Lenin and Trotsky led the Russian working class in the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government. Soviet Russia withdrew from the war. One year later, in November 1918, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, the German working class rose up against the war. That uprising finally brought World War I to an end.

Like the outbreak of World War I, the pandemic may have appeared at first as one of those unforeseeable tragedies that occasionally befall mankind, for which no one can be justly held directly responsible. But that was not true of World War I and it is not true of the pandemic. The outbreak of war in 1914, whatever the immediate circumstances, and its disastrous consequences were rooted in the policies and interests pursued by the imperialist powers of the day.

The exact circumstances and the precise location of the initial transmission of the COVID-19 virus from animal to human could not be predicted. But epidemiologists have been warning of such an event with ever-increasing urgency for the last 30 years. The terrible impact of a pandemic in terms of mortality, social dislocation and emotional trauma had been described in detail. But neither the governments of the United States nor Europe heeded these warnings. The necessary economic expenditures were seen as unwarranted subtractions from profit margins and the vast sums allocated to the innumerable forms of financial speculation that have nourished the fortunes of the super-rich.

By no later than early January 2020, the governments of the United States, Canada and Europe certainly knew that the outbreak of the pandemic could lead to a massive loss of life. But they were far more concerned that the implementation of the critical measures to prevent the uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 virus—universal testing, contact tracing and the strict lockdown of all non-essential workplaces—would lead to huge losses on the financial markets and cut off desperately needed revenues to massively indebted corporations. The Trump administration decided—with the clandestine approval of the Congress—to deliberately downplay the danger. The critical months of February and March 2020 were used not to contain the virus' spread, but to prepare a massive multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the banks, corporations and financial speculators.

Growing working-class demands for a shutdown of unsafe work locations and schools led to belated and limited containment measures.

But once the financial and corporate bailout was implemented in late March 2020, the ruling classes unleashed a vile campaign for a reopening of businesses and schools, under the slogan “The cure must not be worse than the disease.” Sweden’s reckless and disastrous decision to allow the virus to spread freely in order to achieve herd immunity was promoted in the capitalist press of America and Europe as the model for all governments.

It is an indisputable fact that the subordination of human lives to financial interests is responsible for millions of untimely deaths. The overwhelming majority of COVID-19 deaths should have been prevented. The devastating impact of the pandemic is due far more to the economic interests of the capitalist class than to the biological structure of the virus.

Moreover, like World War I, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the deep-rooted economic, political and social contradictions of the capitalist system on both a national and international scale. The pandemic has laid bare a degree of inequality that is obviously incompatible with social stability, let alone traditional democratic forms of rule. In his State of the Union address, President Biden all but acknowledged the United States to be a dysfunctional society, with millions of people living in acutely desperate conditions. He referred to his encounters with Americans who told him that they faced eviction from their homes, were unable to feed their families, and who could not afford medical care. Thirty-five percent of rural Americans, Biden admitted, did not have access to the internet.

Speaking just 114 days after the armed fascist assault on Congress, organized by the previous president, Biden—protected by troops and police that surrounded the Capitol building—declared that the American people “have stared into the abyss of insurrection and autocracy, pandemic and pain.” He described the events of January 6 as “an existential crisis—a test of whether our democracy could survive.”

He then stated that “the struggle is far from over,” and proceeded to call into question whether democracy will survive in the United States. “The question of whether our democracy will long endure is both ancient and urgent, as old as our Republic—still vital today.”

Never in the history of the United States has a president expressed in a public address, delivered before the entire population, such a degree of demoralization and desperation.

And what did President Biden offer as a solution to this existential crisis? Nothing but a series of vague promises of half-measures and quarter-measures. He will attempt to empty an ocean of inequality with a teaspoon. The Wall Street and corporate oligarchy will not place a larger implement at his disposal. Biden’s “reform” program does not include a single measure that will undermine to the slightest degree the wealth and power of the American ruling class. He explicitly reassured the oligarchs and the most affluent sections of the middle class: “I think you should be able to become a billionaire and a millionaire...” All he asks is that they pay their “fair share.” As if capitalists’ accumulation of millions and billions is possible without the massive exploitation of the working class in the United States and internationally.

The real agenda of Biden emerged when he turned his attention to the global objectives of the American ruling class. The United States, he declared, is “in competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century. We’re at a great inflection point in history.”

Biden’s domestic program was framed entirely in terms of economic nationalism and the struggle to sustain the global supremacy of the United States. He pledged that his “American Jobs Plan will be guided by one principle: Buy American. Buy American.”

The thrust of Biden’s program of economic nationalism is the creation of a “Fortress America,” preparing to fight China and other geopolitical and economic rivals in “the competition we have with the rest of the world to win the 21st century.”

An essential and critical component of the US drive for global

hegemony is the suppression of any independent expression by the working class of its own social interests.

The Biden administration and the ruling class as a whole is fully aware that the pandemic has accelerated a process of working-class radicalization that has been developing throughout the past decade. The greatest fear of the ruling class is an uncontrolled eruption of the class struggle that overwhelms all the existing institutions—the two-party system, the propaganda media, the entertainment-sports-religion industry, the academic citadels of race and gender politics and the existing trade unions.

It is especially the far-advanced discrediting of the AFL-CIO and its associated unions that evokes profound anxiety within the ruling class. For the last four decades, the American ruling class has relied on these corrupt organizations—“unions” in name only—to suppress the social resistance of the working class. And it must be acknowledged that these reactionary and oppressive anti-working-class corporate syndicates—staffed by thousands of executives and administrators who collect billions of dollars in salaries—have performed their work with great efficiency. For the past 35 years, strikes have virtually disappeared in the United States, wages have been slashed and millions of jobs have been destroyed.

Within this context, Biden’s call for the strengthening of the existing unions is aimed not at promoting working-class militancy, but of preempting its development and ensuring its continued suppression.

Moreover, the obliteration of any form of independent working-class organization in a government-sponsored labor movement—completely integrated into the capitalist state along corporatist lines—is a strategic imperative for American imperialism as it prepares, under conditions of profound economic crisis, for what is seen in ruling circles as an inevitable confrontation with China. It is highly significant that the “White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment,” created by President Biden in an executive order issued this past week, includes as its three leading members Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen—formerly chairman of the Federal Reserve—and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. In other words, Biden’s “empowerment” of government-sponsored trade unions will take place under the aegis of the members of his cabinet principally responsible for military operations, economic policy and domestic repression.

What Biden is creating resembles the sort of corporatist state structure, based on the forcible amalgamation of corporate management and official government-directed trade unions, established under fascist regimes in the 1920s and 1930s. Trotsky explained the objective economic impulse driving this process:

Monopoly capitalism does not rest on competition and free private initiative but on centralized command. The capitalist cliques at the head of the mighty trusts, syndicates, banking consortiums, et cetera, view economic life from the very heights as does state power; and they require at every step the collaboration of the latter. . . . By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism.

The Biden administration is not fascist, but its policies, determined by the economic and geopolitical imperatives of American imperialism, anticipate policies that would be implemented by a fascist regime were it to come to power, albeit with unlimited brutality and without any semblance of legal restraints on the exercise of violence against the working class.

The tendency toward the corporatist suppression of the working class is

by no means a purely American phenomenon. Though the methods employed by specific capitalist governments are influenced by national conditions and traditions, the basic tendency toward ever more severe containment and repression of working-class struggle manifests itself in every country. The working class cannot be allowed the opportunity to advance its own social interests, in opposition to the domestic and international agendas pursued by the ruling elites. For the maintenance of social control, the military and police are not sufficient. Particularly in a period of mounting social radicalization, the premature deployment of these basic forces of repression can result in political disaster. The function of the trade unions is to keep the working class tightly bound to the capitalist agenda. The apparatus must suppress strikes and ensure their prompt betrayal if they cannot be entirely prevented. The betrayals carried out by the unions create the demoralization that clears the path for the victory of fascism.

But these defeats must be prevented. The class struggle—the necessary social process upon which the revolutionary renewal and progressive development of human civilization depends—must not be suppressed. The great creative power of the working class must be unleashed within the United States and throughout the world.

If the pandemic is to finally be brought under control, if the drive toward war is to be stopped, if dictatorship is to be prevented and if an ecological disaster is to be averted, new means and instruments of social struggle must be created.

That is why the International Committee of the Fourth International has issued the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The aim of this global initiative is to develop a genuine broad-based movement of the international working class, and to encourage workers in all countries to break out of the prison-like shackles in which they are confined by the existing state-controlled and anti-democratic unions, staffed by right-wing pro-capitalist executives.

The IWA-RFC will strive to break down national barriers, oppose all efforts to undermine class unity through the promotion of racial, ethnic and related forms of reactionary, middle-class identity politics, and facilitate the coordination of class struggle on an international scale.

It will, through these efforts to unify workers across national boundaries, contribute mightily toward the creation of a global movement to counteract and prevent the drive for war.

And let me make this point very clear. The International Committee emphatically condemns the slanders hurled against the Chinese people by American imperialism. They are lies, and nothing but lies.

In its efforts to assist workers in the formation and building of the IWA-RFC, the International Committee of the Fourth International, its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site* will seek to impart to these efforts a clear international strategy, to explain the connection between local struggles and the unfolding global struggle of the working class against capitalism and imperialism.

In the darkest hours of the First World War, Trotsky recognized that the global crisis would unleash powerful forces of revolutionary change. He wrote:

“The revolutionary epoch will create new forms of organization out of the inexhaustible resources of proletarian socialism, new forms that will be equal to the greatness of new tasks.”

These words apply with even greater force to the crisis of the present-day world. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is a new form of organization, whose creation is a response to the demands of a new epoch of revolutionary struggle.

It is the international working class and socialism that will win the 21st century.



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