

The class struggle and the fight to eradicate COVID-19

Marcus Day

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More than a year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic, a movement is emerging among parents, teachers, students, workers and scientists for policies to eradicate the coronavirus globally.

On October 15, the second school strike called by UK parent Lisa Diaz took place. The strikes on October 1 and October 15 were called to demand the shutdown of unsafe schools to stop the transmission of the coronavirus among children, who have been forced back into classrooms under conditions in which governments are abandoning all measures to contain the pandemic.

The strikes have been international in form and content. Parents and workers around the world issued statements and made videos supporting the strike, including from Britain, the United States, Canada, Brazil, Germany, France, Poland, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Australia and New Zealand. The hashtag #SchoolStrike2021 was tweeted nearly 7,500 times the day of the event, trending in the UK, and has been used close to 40,000 times over the last three weeks. Diaz has called for the school strikes to now take place every Friday.

What distinguishes the October 15 strike from the last one is that it takes place against the backdrop of a growing strike movement that has rapidly escalated even in the past two weeks, revealing the social force that has the power to compel the implementation of an eradication policy worldwide.

Last week, over 10,000 workers at farm and construction equipment maker John Deere walked out, the first strike at the company in 35 years, after workers rejected a United Auto Workers-backed contract by 90 percent. A strike by 60,000 film and TV production workers in California was only called off at the last moment late Saturday night by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) union after it announced a tentative agreement with Hollywood producers. News of the deal provoked widespread

opposition among film workers on social media who know that the “11th hour” agreement fails to meet their demands.

Strikes elsewhere are continuing among Kellogg’s food production workers, Alabama coal miners, and nurses in New York, Massachusetts and Minnesota. In the largest walkout globally, approximately 170,000 metalworkers in South Africa are nearing the end of their second week on strike, demanding wage increases to make up for surging inflation.

Although it is not yet fully understood by many of the workers engaged in these strikes, there is a profound connection between the fight against the pandemic and the class struggle. The conditions workers are fighting against existed in significant measure before COVID-19, but they have been dramatically intensified by the criminal response to it by the ruling elite, which has subordinated every major decision to its pursuit of profit.

The loss of human life has reached a level unprecedented outside wartime. Total reported COVID-19 deaths in the US are now fast approaching 750,000, with over 20,000 succumbing to the virus in the last two weeks. Official figures nevertheless remain a substantial undercount. As many as 17 million globally, including more than one million in the US, may have died since the onset of the pandemic when unreported deaths are taken into account, according to models by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

In the US alone, more than 1,500 people continue to die on average each day from the coronavirus, nearly double the rate at the same time last year, before vaccines were available. The US is heading into winter this year at a significantly higher level of daily cases, hospitalizations and deaths than it did in 2020, when holiday travel and greater time spent indoors contributed to the worst surge of the pandemic to date.

But the horrific scale of mass death at present would hardly be known if one went solely by mainstream media reports. Instead, the corporate press has been working overtime to manipulate public opinion with claims that the pandemic is nearly over, as has been falsely asserted numerous times before. A report in the *New York Times* in September claimed, “Even as the virus spreads and seems to be hurtling toward becoming endemic, it could become a less lethal threat that can be managed with vaccines that are updated periodically to protect against variants.”

To the extent that the pandemic still appears as a subject of discussion in media reports and official political discourse, it is to enforce the boundaries of acceptable debate as being between a strategy of “herd immunity”—letting the virus rip through the population with no restrictions whatsoever—versus “mitigation,” i.e., keeping schools and workplaces open with only minimal mask and vaccine requirements, while presenting shutdowns, the closure of schools, paid leave for workers, and universal testing and contact tracing as beyond the pale.

The attempts to force the population to surrender to the virus have been rejected by principled epidemiologists and public health experts. “The learn to live with the virus mantra is last year’s natural infection herd immunity,” Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding of the Federation of American Scientists told the WSWS in an interview last month. Instead, he said, “We should aim for zero; we should aim for as low as humanly possible.”

The media cover-up of COVID’s ongoing deadly impact and the attempts to chloroform the population are going hand in hand with a campaign to roll back any remaining workplace protections against the virus, in order to speed up production as much as possible.

Dana Inc. auto parts workers in Ohio have told the WSWS that the coronavirus is “spreading like wildfire” in their plant, with the large number of workers out sick exacerbating staffing shortages. Meanwhile, the trade unions are overseeing the disastrous conditions, doing nothing to protect workers, in line with their conduct throughout the pandemic. The UAW and United Steelworkers unions have kept Dana workers on the job under day-to-day contract extensions, with many working in excess of 60 hours a week, despite workers voting down a union-backed contract proposal by 90 percent in September.

The corporations and their political representatives are responding with increasing desperation to the supply chain disruptions that are a consequence of their own

criminal mishandling of the pandemic. Last week, the Biden administration announced plans to run the Port of Long Beach in California 24/7 with the support of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which will inevitably entail brutal demands upon port workers who are already at the breaking point.

Both the growing movement to eradicate COVID-19 and the increasing resistance of the working class to ever greater levels of exploitation are being driven by the same underlying objective cause: the crisis and breakdown of capitalism. After allowing a social catastrophe of unprecedented proportions to engulf the population, bourgeois governments are now seeking to offload the cost of their ongoing crisis onto workers, enforcing longer hours and new attacks on wages and benefits.

The task facing socialists and all those who wish to put an end to the pandemic for good is to work unrelentingly to fuse these movements, make them conscious of their common aims, and develop a common strategy which bases itself on securing the needs of the vast majority of the world’s people, the working class.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board wrote in a statement on October 5: “The working class cannot advance the fight against the pandemic without the aid of science, and the implementation of the scientifically necessary measures to stop the pandemic depends on the building of a movement in the working class.”

On October 24, the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) are co-hosting an online meeting, How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication, which will outline the path forward. At the event, scientists and workers will review the real state of the pandemic and the policies and measures necessary to eradicate the virus and prevent a further unnecessary loss of life. We urge all our readers to make plans to attend this critically important meeting and promote it on social media and elsewhere, so that it reaches the widest possible audience.



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