

2022: Year Three of the pandemic and the emerging global class struggle

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1. As the New Year begins, the COVID-19 pandemic has entered its most dangerous and deadly phase. The Omicron variant, first identified in late November 2021, is now the dominant strain globally. It is spreading with extraordinary speed throughout Europe and the United States, propelling daily new cases to their highest levels on record. In the last week of 2021, average daily infections in the United States were approaching 500,000.

2. The global pandemic is a catastrophe of historic dimensions. It is also a crime, because the disastrous impact of the pandemic is the result of decisions made by capitalist governments—first and foremost, in the United States and Western Europe—to deliberately prioritize profits over lives, to reject the implementation of public health measures required to eliminate SARS-CoV-2 and, instead, to adopt policies that allow the virus to spread wildly throughout the global population.

3. Throughout 2020 and well into 2021, governments and the media maintained the pretense that the fight against the pandemic could be successfully conducted on a business-friendly basis, through a combination of vaccinations and an eclectic assortment of mitigation measures. This approach, they claimed, would allow schools to safely reopen and workers to remain on their jobs. These claims were, from the start, based on a deliberate suppression of science, which had established that SARS-CoV-2 was transmitted primarily through aerosols, small particles which linger in the air for hours. Indoor spaces lacking proper filtration and ventilation, including the vast majority of schools and workplaces, have thus been the primary centers of viral transmission. An even more fundamental lie was that the pandemic could be suppressed on the basis of national initiatives, thus legitimizing the absence of a global strategy and effective programs to make vaccines freely available to all countries. But all the lies and false strategies have been totally exploded by the eruption of the Omicron variant.

4. The response to Omicron has been the complete collapse of the pretense that the governments are focused on ending the pandemic. Spearheaded by the United States and Western Europe, the strategy being openly pursued by most governments throughout the world is that of “herd immunity.” The underlying conception of this criminal policy is that at some point, as yet unknown, so many people will have been infected that the virus will exhaust the available pool of easily accessible victims. As the *Financial Times* editorialized on January 3, “it is reasonable to conclude that the interaction between virus and the human immune system means that the more people acquire some protection against severe Covid symptoms through vaccination or infection, the better the outlook.”

5. It should be especially noted that the FT does not even consider the possibility of eliminating the disease. “Whatever slim chance we might have had at the beginning of 2020 to eliminate Covid-19 has long gone,” it asserts. “Efforts to control the pandemic have been justified so far as in the context of a global health emergency but they cannot continue

indefinitely. The collateral damage—to mental health and well-being, social cohesion and the global economy—would be too great.”

6. The import of this statement is clear: SARS-CoV-2 will persist for years, even decades, as an endemic illness. What will be the consequence in suffering and human lives? The corporate-financial oligarchies and the governments they control could not care less. An abhorrent anti-social mindset is deeply rooted within the capitalist class. It is focused not on the death toll but on share market valuation.

7. Charles Dickens famously described the years before the French Revolution as the “best of times” and the “worst of times.” How well these words apply to the present reality. For the capitalist class, the years of the pandemic have been nothing less than a blessing. The market valuation of Apple has risen 125 percent to more than \$3.0 trillion. That of Microsoft has risen 110 percent to \$2.5 trillion. Alphabet’s market valuation is up 108 percent to \$1.9 trillion. The share value of Tesla, controlled by the sociopath Elon Musk, has risen 1,311 percent to \$1.1 trillion. The collective wealth of the richest 5 percent and the most affluent sections of the middle class has soared.

8. But the overwhelming mass of society has been living in the “worst of times.” In the two years since the pandemic began, official statistics record that 5.5 million people have died. This includes more than 840,000 in the United States alone. The real death toll, however, measured by “excess deaths” over what would have been expected without the pandemic, is estimated at more than 18 million. Thus, total deaths from the pandemic in just two years since January 2020 rival the approximately 20 million military and civilian deaths during the four years of World War I (1914-1918).

9. The death toll, as terrible as it is, is an inadequate measure of the devastating impact of the pandemic. A large percentage of people infected with SARS-CoV-2 grapple with prolonged symptoms known as Long COVID, which affects multiple organ systems and produces a wide range of debilitating, physically painful, and emotionally scarring effects. According to a report posted online by *EClinicalMedicine* in July 2021, a majority of respondents to its study required more than 35 weeks (almost nine months) to recover from Long COVID.

10. This outcome was not inevitable. The experience in China, with a population of 1.4 billion people, demonstrates that a “Zero COVID” policy is both viable and extremely effective. By implementing this policy China has succeeded in limiting deaths to under 5,000, with only two deaths since May 2020.

11. Having rejected the option of eliminating the virus, the media in the United States and Europe portray China’s policy as a brutal and even bizarre response to the disease. China’s government is certainly “authoritarian.” But the term is applied maliciously to discredit a correct response, which has broad-based public support, to the pandemic. In fact, China has thus far been able to contain the virus by utilizing basic public health measures developed *over centuries*—including targeted lockdowns, mass testing and contact tracing, and the isolation of infected individuals.

12. The use of quarantine to stop infections, for example, is a method of disease prevention that dates to the era of the Black Death in 14th century Venice. Of course, the modern means employed to quarantine the ill are vastly more sophisticated and humane than was possible in the primitive conditions that prevailed 800 years ago. But even in Medieval Europe, death was viewed as the worst outcome of a disease, to be prevented if at all possible. Why is it that in the 21st century, countries with the most advanced technologies at their disposal decide as a matter of policy to view the loss of life as preferable to the loss of money? The blunt force “herd immunity” response adopted by existing capitalist governments—deliberately rejecting measures that could stop the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and end the pandemic—represents a horrifying social and moral regression.

13. Trotsky once observed that necessity in history “is realized through the natural selection of accidents.” That a particular bat virus infected humans at a Wuhan wet market was an accident. But the possibility of such an incident—rooted in a complex interaction of social, economic and environmental conditions—had been foreseen. In this historical sense, the zoonotic transfer of the virus was “an accident waiting to happen.” Similarly, the absence of serious preparation for such an incident by the major capitalist countries and the disastrous series of decisions that followed were determined by the historically obsolete structures of global capitalism and the reactionary social and economic interests of its ruling class.

Public health and social progress in history

14. The state of public health is among the most critical indices of social progress and the overall condition of society. As the late brilliant scholar George Rosen wrote in *The History of Public Health*, published in 1958, “The protection and promotion of the health and welfare of its citizens is considered to be one of the most important functions of the modern state.” [1] The advances in public hygiene, the understanding of the human organism, the treatment of diseases, the recognition of the importance of an antiseptic environment to combat infections, the development of vaccines and antibiotics, the lowering of infant mortality and the rise in life expectancy—such achievements have been considered landmarks in the history of human civilization.

15. A critical element of Enlightenment thought in the 18th century was the conviction that there existed a profound relationship between the physical health of a country’s population and the quality of its social and political organization. This belief was upheld by adherents of the Enlightenment in North America and invoked in support of the revolutionary struggle of the colonials against Great Britain. Benjamin Rush, the close friend of Thomas Jefferson and among the most influential exponents of the American Enlightenment, observed in a paper read in 1774 before the American Philosophical Society—as noted by George Rosen—“that disease, political institutions, and economic organization were so interrelated that any great social change produced accompanying changes in health.” [2]

16. This insight of Enlightenment thought was vindicated by subsequent advances in the sphere of public health, which could not have been achieved without the struggles of the working class in the revolutionary democratic and socialist movements that emerged in the 19th and, even more powerfully, 20th centuries. The connection between the growth of the industrial working class as an increasingly powerful social, political and, potentially, revolutionary force and the emergence of public health as a central issue in modern society is an indisputable historical fact. The advances made by the working class were reflected in the improvement in

public health. The most significant of these advances was the 1917 October Revolution.

The world historical significance of the October Revolution

17. The 1917 October Revolution in Russia, led by the Bolshevik Party and arising out of the carnage of the first imperialist world war, marked a turning point in world history. The establishment of the first workers’ state, in a country of 150 million people, demonstrated in practice the historically transitory character of capitalism and the rule of the bourgeoisie. The social impact and historical implications of the October Revolution were of a global character. The establishment of workers’ power and the liquidation of capitalist ownership of the means of production began in Russia. But, as foreseen by Trotsky:

The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and broader sense of the word; it attains completion, only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet. [3]

18. The October Revolution not only carried out an immensely progressive socio-economic and cultural transformation within the borders of the Soviet Union. Its greatest impact was the impulse it gave to the struggles of the working class and oppressed masses throughout the world. The founding of the Communist International and its first four congresses, held between 1919 and 1922, placed the problem of preparing and leading the socialist revolution on the political agenda of the international working class.

19. The ruling classes recognized from the outset the immense danger posed by the October Revolution. As the magnitude of the defeat it had suffered in Russia became clear, the capitalist class in Europe resorted to savage violence to suppress the threat of socialist revolution. It was in the aftermath of the October Revolution that fascism first emerged as a significant movement.

20. For all its wealth and power, the American ruling class was second to none in its fear of socialist revolution. This fear was not the expression of an irrational paranoia. The massive scale of American capitalism, as it rapidly developed in the aftermath of the Civil War, produced an immense working class, multiracial and multiethnic, whose power, if infused with class consciousness and politically directed, could pose an unstoppable challenge to the existing social order. As early as 1871, the American ruling class responded to the emergence of the Paris Commune with an outburst of anticommunist frenzy. As the class struggle developed in the United States from the 1870s on, the ruthless violence utilized by the government and corporations to suppress labor was buttressed ideologically by anticommunism.

As historian Nick Fischer wrote:

Notwithstanding the cold-blooded efficiency with which it is usually applied, anticommunism often expressed a primal fear that the forces of “communism” might succeed where all previous doctrines and people’s movements had failed; “communists” might just meld the disparate elements of America’s vast underclass into a united force that would rise up in revolution, as had occurred in Paris and later in Russia in 1905. Where

Progressivism, Populism, Free Silver, homesteads, Free Soil, Redemption, Reconstruction, and emancipation fell short, “communism” might triumph. Under its banner, the huge urban and rural proletariats might sink their differences; so, too, might white and black laborers and sharecroppers, native-born and immigrant factory hands, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews. Here was the nightmare. [4]

The response of American imperialism to the Russian Revolution

21. The October Revolution was seen by the American ruling class not only as a threat to domestic stability. It is one of the greatest of historical ironies that two momentous events in history—one counterrevolutionary and the other revolutionary—occurred in the same month of the same year, within weeks of one another. On April 3, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, called upon the US Congress to declare war on Germany, an event that marked the emergence of the United States as the principal world imperialist power. Two weeks later, on April 16, 1917, Lenin arrived from exile in Petrograd and called upon the Bolshevik Party to prepare for the overthrow of the Russian capitalist Provisional Government and the establishment of workers’ power, based on soviets (workers’ councils).

22. The significance of this remarkable intersection of historical processes is that the ascendancy of American imperialism developed alongside the ever-present threat of social revolution. Throughout the 20th century, the central strategic problem that confronted the US ruling class was how to respond to the combined domestic and global danger.

23. The initial response was the use of violence. The administration of Woodrow Wilson dispatched troops to the Soviet Union in what proved to be a disastrous military campaign to overthrow the Bolshevik government. Within the United States, the “progressive” Wilson administration reacted to the wave of militancy with a paroxysm of repression. The years 1919 and 1920 witnessed the infamous “Red Scare,” the notorious Palmer Raids, the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the brutal suppression of the nationwide steel strike. Throughout the 1920s, political reaction—under the slogan of a “Return to Normalcy”—prevailed. The Ku Klux Klan grew rapidly. Henry Ford, the bitter enemy of labor and anti-Semite, followed Hitler’s progress in Germany with enthusiasm and provided financial support for the Nazis. Sacco and Vanzetti, despite worldwide protests, were finally murdered in the electric chair by the State of Massachusetts in August 1927.

24. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the onset of the Depression forced a change in the domestic policy of the American ruling class. The dire social conditions radicalized the working class. Despite the fact that the Stalinist regime in the USSR was ever more explicitly repudiating the perspective of world socialist revolution, the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which came to power in 1933, feared the impact of the example of the October Revolution on the consciousness of the working class. Roosevelt’s promise of a “New Deal” for the American people, which was followed by reforms such as the introduction of “social security,” was motivated by fear that the rising tide of class struggle in the United States—spearheaded by the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and an unprecedented wave of strikes in which the socialist left played a major role—could assume, as indicated in the sit-down strikes that involved the seizure of factories, an overtly revolutionary character.

25. The outbreak of World War II had the long-term effect of radicalizing the working class and oppressed masses on an international scale. Though the policies pursued by Stalin throughout the 1930s, including the murderous purges and the signing of the 1939 Non-

Aggression Pact with Hitler, had brought the Soviet Union to the very brink of disaster, the economic and social achievements of the USSR made possible a recovery from the initial defeats that followed the German invasion of June 1941. After the United States entered the world war in December 1941, victory over Germany and Japan was not possible without an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Social reforms in the aftermath of World War II

26. The Soviet Union played the decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany. Although the Stalinist regime sought an accommodation with the United States, it could not entirely control the wave of mass struggles that swept across the globe in the aftermath of the war. For their part, the United States and its imperialist allies sought to stave off the revolutionary threat with a skillful combination of brutal military actions, political repression and reformist compromise. The interaction of these elements, internationally and domestically, was the defining characteristic of the Cold War.

27. During the quarter century that followed the end of World War II, a domestic policy of social compromise predominated. The material basis for compromise was the general expansion of the world economy that made possible the granting of social reforms. On the international front, the United States led the global imperialist resistance to the post-World War II anticolonial movements. It orchestrated the overthrow of regimes—as in Iran and Guatemala—that were seen as undermining the global interests of US imperialism. In Korea and Vietnam, the United States resorted to a staggering level of military violence. But its ability to deploy the full weight of its military power—particularly the use of nuclear weapons (to which the United States had resorted in 1945 against Japan)—was to a great extent determined by the restraints imposed upon it by the existence of the Soviet Union. The United States could not exclude the possibility that unlimited military action against a Soviet ally could trigger a military response by the Kremlin with potentially devastating global consequences. This was certainly the decisive factor that led President Truman to decide against waging nuclear war against China in 1950, President Kennedy against invading Cuba in 1962, and Presidents Johnson and Nixon against dropping nuclear bombs on North Vietnam.

28. The major reform initiatives within the United States and Western Europe were profoundly affected by the residual political and social consequences of the October Revolution. The establishment of the *sozialmarktwirtschaft* (social market economy) in Germany and the National Health Service in Britain, as well as the many other forms of social welfare states that emerged in the wake of World War II, were all the products of the aftershocks of the October Revolution. Within the United States, the extension of the New Deal in the form of the Great Society of the 1960s was the manifestation of this same process. Of all the initiatives undertaken by the Great Society, the introduction of Medicare and, later, Medicaid, were the most significant. Both would become, in the ensuing years of political reaction, targets of relentless attack by the two capitalist parties.

29. The breakdown of the international and domestic political arrangements of the postwar order was the product of the crisis and weakness of capitalism, not its strength. The long-term decline in the global economic position of the United States, reflected in the steady deterioration in its trade and payments balances, reached a point of crisis in the late 1960s. Rising inflation and pressure on the national budget were seen as warnings that the United States could not finance simultaneously wars overseas and social reform at home. The rising militancy of the working class, an international process, threatened to

escape the control of the reformist parties and trade unions. The 1971 decision of the United States to end the Bretton Woods system, established in 1944 and based on dollar-gold convertibility, sounded the death knell of national reformist policies and the beginning of a new period of capitalist social reaction.

30. The Soviet Union and its Eastern European “buffer states” were not exempted from the mounting crisis of nationally based reformism. The development and growing complexity of the Soviet economy rendered its system of national planning increasingly unviable. It required access to the resources of the world economy, but this could be achieved only in one of two ways: either through the overthrow of capitalism and the reorganization of world economy on a socialist basis; or through the integration of the Soviet economy into the structures of world capitalism. The latter course would require the dismantling of nationalized industry, the abandonment of the state monopoly on foreign trade, the creation of a labor market, and the removal of restraints on the ownership of private property and the accumulation of personal wealth.

31. The first course was absolutely incompatible with the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. The defense of its material privileges was inextricably dependent upon the policy of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism, which was a rebranding of the old Stalinist program of “socialism in one country.” Thus, the course chosen by the Stalinist regime was the final repudiation of the entire progressive economic and social heritage of the October Revolution. The outcome of this monstrous betrayal was tragic not only for the Soviet people. It opened the floodgates for a global assault on all progressive advances made by the working class in the course of the 20th century. The brutal response of the ruling class to the pandemic can be understood only in this historic context.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the social impact of 30 years of capitalist reaction

32. It is now 30 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The decision by the Stalinist regime headed by Mikhail Gorbachev to restore private ownership of the means of production was hailed by the ruling class as the decisive and irreversible historical triumph of capitalism. Some even declared the “end of history.” The end of the USSR, they claimed, proved that bourgeois democracy, based on capitalism and the nation-state system, represented the climax of human progress. The challenge posed by socialism to capitalism had been defeated for all time.

33. This delusory interpretation of history was based on two fundamental misconceptions: The first was that Soviet Stalinism had anything to do with socialism and Marxism; the second was that the demise of the Stalinist regime signified the transcendence and resolution of the historic crisis of capitalism.

34. In May 1990, as the Stalinist states in Eastern Europe were beginning the process of liquidating nationalized property relations, and as Gorbachev pursued policies that would culminate in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the International Committee of the Fourth International discussed the implications of these developments for the perspective of socialist revolution. A report to the 10th Plenum of the ICFI explained:

There are two possible interpretations which can be given to the events in Eastern Europe. One can say that this represents a historic triumph of capitalism over socialism; the working class has suffered a massive historical defeat; the perspective of socialism has essentially come to ruin, and we stand on the

threshold of a whole new period of capitalist development. Or—and this is, of course, the standpoint of the International Committee, which distinguishes us from all other tendencies—that the breakdown of the imperialist postwar order opens up a period of profound disequilibrium which is going to be resolved internationally in the course of massive political and social struggles; that what predominates today is a level of instability unequalled at any time since the 1930s. [5]

35. Three decades later, there is no doubt as to which of the possible interpretations of the dissolution of the Soviet Union has proven correct. Far from the capitalist system overcoming its contradictions and initiating a new epoch of progress, the last three decades have been characterized by the extreme growth of social inequality, a series of endless and expanding imperialist wars of aggression and the escalating breakdown of democratic forms of rule. All of these tendencies have been accelerated over the two years of the pandemic.

The massive growth of social inequality

36. The financial oligarchy has used the pandemic to steal as it has never stolen before. Sanctioned by the CARES Act, passed on an overwhelmingly bipartisan basis in March of 2020, the US Federal Reserve flooded Wall Street with trillions of dollars in cash. According to *Forbes* magazine, US billionaires held a collective wealth of \$3.4 trillion on New Year’s Day 2020, already a staggering sum. Two years later, their wealth stands at nearly \$5.3 trillion—an increase of more than \$1.8 trillion during the course of the pandemic.

37. The same policy has been implemented in all the major capitalist countries. According to a report in the *Financial Times* on December 28 (“Companies raise over \$12tn in ‘blockbuster’ year for global capital markets”), global corporations

raised a record \$12.1tn in 2021 by selling stock, issuing debt and inking new loans, as a torrent of central bank stimulus and the rapid recovery from the pandemic propelled many global markets higher.

With a few days still left in the year, the cash haul is already up almost 17 per cent from 2020, which was itself a historic year, and almost a quarter above the take in 2019 before the coronavirus crisis, according to *Financial Times* calculations based on Refinitiv data. The ferocious pace of fundraising underscores just how easy financial conditions are in many parts of the world, most notably the US, where more than \$5tn was raised.

38. The corollary to the bailout of the financial markets is the imperative that workers remain on the job producing profits, and that their children be sent back to school to contract and spread the virus. It is this class logic that has driven the policy of the ruling class to the pandemic, whether in the form of the open promotion of mass infection or the “vaccine-only” strategy promoted by the Biden administration.

The global eruption of American imperialism

39. In addition to the predatory interests of the ruling class, a rational, scientific response to the pandemic has been blocked by the division of the world into competing nation-states. The pandemic is by its very nature a global problem that can be addressed only on the basis of international collaboration. This has been rendered impossible by the national and geopolitical conflicts between the major capitalist powers.

40. The dissolution of the Soviet Union three decades ago was followed by an unending series of wars, led by American imperialism, in the Middle East and Central Asia. Over the past decade, the United States has shifted the targets of its war planning ever more directly to what it sees as its principal geopolitical rivals, above all, Russia and China.

41. The militarist threats have only intensified over the two years of the pandemic. The New Year begins with the Biden administration leading a reckless NATO-backed military buildup in Ukraine, spurring the right-wing Ukrainian government to deploy 125,000 soldiers to its border with Russia and warning Russian President Vladimir Putin that the US will not “accept anybody’s red lines.” Far from restraining the Ukraine regime, the Biden administration seems intent on encouraging a military clash. In December, Democratic Senator Chris Murphy threatened that “Ukraine can become the next Afghanistan for Russia if it chooses to move further.”

42. But the provocations against Russia, as dangerous as they are, are to a great extent driven by the United States’ determination to block what it views as the threat posed to its global hegemonic position by China. The possibility, even the inevitability, of war with China is a dominant theme in the US foreign policy establishment and the media. The United States is escalating its denunciations of China for alleged violations of human rights and “genocide” against the Uighurs. The systematic militarization of the South China Sea and encirclement of China continues.

43. The pandemic has intensified the danger of war. A major and increasing factor in the world situation is the temptation of the United States and its imperialist allies in Europe and the Asia Pacific to view war as a means of distracting attention from the disastrous consequences of their domestic policies and fixating the public on an external enemy. This has certainly been the motivation behind “Wuhan Lab Lie,” which claims, in defiance of well-documented evidence, that the pandemic was caused by either a leak or the criminal manufacture of a deadly pathogen.

The breakdown of democracy

44. Finally, the pandemic has enormously accelerated the breakdown of democratic forms of rule, as the financial oligarchy has implemented a policy that has led to the deaths of millions. During the first year of the pandemic, fascist organizations mobilized by the Trump administration were utilized as the spearhead for the campaign against lockdowns and all public health measures necessary to contain the virus. In the runup to the 2020 elections, as the bodies piled up, Trump engaged in a systematic conspiracy to subvert the outcome of the vote and overturn the Constitution.

45. Trump’s conspiracies culminated in the attempted fascist coup of January 6, 2021, a turning point in the political history of the United States. After falsely claiming Biden’s victory in the general election was a product of voter fraud, Trump and fascist strategist Stephen Bannon organized a network of Republican members of Congress and mobilized fascist paramilitaries with the aim of disrupting the Electoral College’s certification of the election. In a January 7 perspective, the WSWS wrote:

The hoary glorifications of the invincibility and timelessness of

American democracy have been totally exposed and discredited as a hollow political myth. The popular phrase “It Can’t Happen Here,” taken from the title of Sinclair Lewis’ justly famous fictional account of the rise of American fascism, has been decisively overtaken by events. Not only can a fascist coup happen here. It has happened here, on the afternoon of January 6, 2021.

46. Even as the Republican Party transforms itself more and more into an openly fascist party, Democrats from Joe Biden to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez continue to refer to them as “our colleagues,” with Biden declaring on January 8, “We need a Republican Party that is principled and strong.” Trump has been left alone to plot his next moves from his Florida palace, his congressional allies still occupy their posts. Preparations to disenfranchise millions of voters in future elections are far advanced in many states.

47. Trump, moreover, is part of an international process, which includes the promotion of the fascist Alternative fur Deutschland in Germany, Vox in Spain, Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil, and the universal elevation of the far right in countries throughout the world.

The pandemic and the global class struggle

48. The experience of the past two years demonstrates that the end of the pandemic will be achieved not merely through medical measures. The way out of what is fundamentally a social crisis demands a political struggle for the reorganization of the world on a different economic and social foundation. All appeals to the capitalist state for a change of policy will fail. The implementation of a scientifically guided and progressive response to the pandemic is possible only to the extent that these policies find the necessary social foundation in a mass movement of the working class on a global scale.

49. But what are the prospects for the development of such a mass movement? In fact, it is already under way. In 2019, the year before the pandemic began, class struggle and social protest erupted throughout the world. There were mass demonstrations and strikes that year in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, France, Spain, Algeria, Britain, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa and India. In the United States, workers at General Motors launched the first national strike by autoworkers in more than 40 years.

50. The global pandemic disrupted the “normal” course of the class struggle. During its initial stages, there were walkouts and wildcat strikes in Italy, the US and other countries that forced the temporary shutdown of factories. With the critical assistance of the unions, however, workers were sent back to work, and the schools were reopened, fueling the massive spike in cases and deaths.

51. The temporary suppression of working class opposition has given way, however, to a powerful resurgence of class struggle. The past year has seen a series of major class battles, expressing anger and opposition both to the pandemic itself and the economic and social consequences of the ruling class’s response to it, including, as the year drew to a close, surging inflation in basic consumer goods.

52. There were major strikes in the US by miners in Alabama; nurses in New York, Massachusetts and Minnesota; Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia; John Deere workers and Kellogg’s cereal workers in the Midwest; and graduate student workers at Columbia University and other campuses; along with wildcat sickouts and other protests among teachers and pharmacy workers.

53. Globally, the past year has seen strikes and protests by 170,000

metalworkers in South Africa; tens of thousands of transport and auto workers in India; 50,000 health care workers and tens of thousands of public sector workers in Sri Lanka; a wildcat strike by thousands of energy workers in Turkey; strikes by thousands of public health care workers and miners in Chile; and mass protests by health care workers in France against the appalling conditions in hospitals. In October, UK parent Lisa Diaz initiated #SchoolStrike protests against unsafe conditions that won broad international support.

54. As 2022 begins and Omicron surges out of control, there is a growing movement of teachers to demand the shutdown of schools to in-person learning and of workers to stop nonessential production in factories and workplaces that are centers for the spread of the disease. The move by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce the period of quarantine from 10 days to five—a policy that was dictated by the major corporations—has produced a colossal degree of social anger and opposition.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

55. The class struggle is objective, arising out of the character of capitalist society and the response of the ruling class to the pandemic. Billions of workers internationally are not going to accept passively the fact that millions of people have died entirely preventable deaths.

56. This objective process must be given an organizational form, and it must be made politically conscious. Over the past year, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has launched two critical initiatives in response to the pandemic: The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.

57. The IWA-RFC was launched in April of 2021, when the global death toll from the pandemic stood at more than three million. The necessity of the IWA-RFC arises from the fact that workers have no organizations that represent their interests. Whether explicitly right-wing or nominally "left," all the political parties and organizations in every major capitalist country have implemented a policy of mass infection and death and rejected the measures demanded by scientists and public health officials to stop the pandemic.

58. As for the trade unions, they have, in the US and every country, worked for decades to suppress the class struggle and impose the demands of the corporations. During the pandemic, they have played a critical role in enforcing the homicidal policy of the ruling class, forcing workers to work under unsafe conditions.

59. In initiating the IWA-RFC, the ICFI explained:

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.

60. The IWA-RFC is based on a fight against all efforts to divide the

working class through the innumerable forms of national, ethnic and racial chauvinism and identity politics. The pandemic is a global crisis, affecting all workers. It exposes as thoroughly reactionary all efforts, promoted by the pseudo-left, to elevate race and gender as the fundamental social categories and to undermine the struggle to unify all workers on the basis of their common class interests.

The Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic and the fight for the eradication of SARS-CoV-2

61. On November 21, the *World Socialist Web Site* initiated the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Inquest is necessary to expose the cover-up, falsifications, and misinformation that have been deployed and continue to be deployed to justify policies responsible for the avoidable deaths of millions of people from the pandemic.

62. The call for the Inquest arose out of a collaboration between the *World Socialist Web Site* and leading scientists and epidemiologists to fight for the global elimination of SARS-CoV-2. This included two international webinars, on August 22 and October 24, providing detailed scientific information proving the necessity and viability of a strategy of global elimination. In introducing the October 24 webinar, the WSWS outlined the principles upon which a fight to end the pandemic must be based:

1. The target of SARS-CoV-2—the virus that causes COVID-19—is not individuals, but entire societies. The virus's mode of transmission is directed toward achieving mass infection. SARS-CoV-2 has evolved biologically to strike billions, and, in so doing, kill millions.

2. Therefore, the only effective strategy is one based on a globally coordinated campaign aimed at the elimination of the virus on every continent, in every region, and in every country. There is no effective national solution to this pandemic. Humanity—people of all races, ethnicities and nationalities—must confront and overcome this challenge through a vast collective and truly selfless global effort.

3. The policies pursued by virtually all governments since the outbreak of the pandemic must be repudiated. The subordination of that which should be the unquestioned priority of social policy—the protection of human life—to the interests of corporate profit and private wealth accumulation cannot be allowed to continue.

4. The initiative to bring about a decisive turn to a strategy directed toward global elimination must come from a socially conscious movement of millions of people.

5. This global movement must draw upon scientific research. The persecution of scientists—many of whom labor under threats to their livelihoods and even their lives—must be ended. The global elimination of the virus requires the closest working alliance between the working class—the great mass of society—and the scientific community.

63. In its statement launching the inquest, the WSWS explained that the "vaccine-only" strategy, the focal point of ruling class policy in the major capitalist countries over the previous year, had failed. Not only is the majority of the world still completely unvaccinated, the WSWS wrote, "Scientists have repeatedly warned that continued mass infection amid the

slow rollout of vaccines creates evolutionary pressures that threaten to produce a vaccine-resistant variant.” Only four days later, these warning were confirmed with the announcement of the identification of the Omicron variant.

64. In five weeks since it was initiated, the Inquest has begun gathering testimony from scientists and from workers on the causes and consequences of the ongoing catastrophe. The Inquest is vitally necessary in arming the working class with an understanding of what has happened and what must now be done to finally end the pandemic once and for all.

The tasks of the International Committee of the Fourth International

65. As we enter the third year of the pandemic, it is clear that the ruling class is pursuing a policy of “endemicizing” the pandemic, that is, allowing the virus to persist as a permanent state of society. There is no limit to the number of dead the ruling class will tolerate when it comes to preserving its wealth and maintaining the profit system. But masses of workers are not going to accept passively the fact that millions of people have died from a preventable pandemic and that millions continue to die every year.

66. Even prior to the pandemic, the objective conditions for socialist revolution had already developed to an extraordinary degree. At the beginning of 2020, in a statement reviewing the deepening economic, political, geopolitical and social crisis that had developed over the previous decade, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote that “the arrival of the New Year marks the beginning of a decade of intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.”

In the future, when learned historians write about the upheavals of the 21st century, they will enumerate all the “obvious” signs that existed, as the 2020s began, of the revolutionary storm that was soon to sweep across the globe. The scholars—with a vast array of facts, documents, charts, website and social media postings, and other forms of valuable digitalized information at their disposal—will describe the 2010s as a period characterized by an intractable economic, social, and political crisis of the world capitalist system.

67. That is, the central contradictions of the world capitalist system—between the global economy and the nation-state system, and between socialized production and private ownership of the means of production—have created the conditions for massive, revolutionary struggles.

68. The development of a revolutionary situation, however, involves two elements: the objective contradictions of the old society, and the consciousness and political organization of the masses—the subjective factor. But the interaction of the objective and subjective factors is complex. “Society does not change its institutions as need arises, the way a mechanic changes his instruments,” Trotsky explained in his monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*.

Entirely exceptional conditions, independent of the will of persons and parties, are necessary in order to tear off from discontent the fetters of conservatism, and bring the masses to insurrection.

The swift changes of mass views and moods in an epoch of

revolution thus derive, not from the flexibility and mobility of man’s mind, but just the opposite, from its deep conservatism. The chronic lag of ideas and relations behind new objective conditions, right up to the moment when the latter crash over people in the form of a catastrophe, is what creates in a period of revolution that leaping movement of ideas and passions which seems to the police mind a mere result of the activities of “demagogues.” [6]

69. The pandemic—which has exposed the obsolescence and irredeemably reactionary character of the world capitalist system, its political institutions and class structure—is the catastrophe that is not only provoking strikes and other forms of social protest but also changing profoundly the consciousness of the working class and the youth. The ruling class hypocritically bemoans the closing of schools, which have been underfunded, understaffed and overcrowded for decades. It is not the absence of formal education that it fears. Capitalist governments know that while they have been out of schools, the young people have not stopped thinking. The pandemic has provided an education of its own, laying bare the nature of capitalist society.

70. But as consciousness undergoes a profound change, there remains the question of revolutionary leadership. Socialist consciousness—that is, scientific understanding of capitalist society and the political program required for the transformation of society—does not arise spontaneously or automatically. The transition of the objective crisis into a conscious political movement for socialism is the great challenge of our time.

71. When humanity is confronted with great social issues, nothing is more futile, not to mention useless, than passive speculation about what can or cannot be achieved. There has never been a period of crisis when the path to progress has been strewn with roses. In such historical moments, as Lincoln once observed, “the occasion is piled high with difficulties.” Mere complaining about—apart from an active struggle against—the impotence and outright treachery of the trade unions and the old ex-reformist and ex-liberal capitalist parties is a distraction from the serious tasks at hand. These organizations, their representatives and accomplices are rotten through and through.

72. There is no way out of the present disaster, let alone the looming catastrophes of fascism, war, and irreversible ecological harm to the planet, except through determined and unyielding struggle.

73. Marxism, based on historical materialism, understands very well the law-governed processes that give rise to genuine mass revolutionary movements. But this understanding of objective processes and the necessity of action by the masses has never been an excuse for individual passivity. Individuals make decisions, including the decision to oppose inequality, injustice and oppression. There has never been, and can never be, a great mass revolutionary movement without individuals making the conscious decision to fight.

74. Therefore, as we enter the new year, we call upon workers and youth to draw the necessary and inescapable political lessons of the last two years of crisis—and, in fact, of history. Capitalism has condemned itself. The future of mankind depends upon the victory of socialism. Join this fight. Build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees! Participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic! Expand the circulation of the *World Socialist Web Site*! Above all, make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party and build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution!

Fill out the form below to get involved.

Footnotes:

[1] *A History of Public Health*, by George Rosen (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958), p. lxxxix

[2] “Social Stress and Mental Disease from the Eighteenth Century to

the Present: Some Origins of Social Psychiatry,” in *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, Jan. 1959, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 9

[3] *The Permanent Revolution* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2010), p. 313

[4] *Spider Web: The Birth of American Anticommunism*, by Nick Fischer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), p. 8

[5] *Workers League Internal Bulletin: 10th Plenum of the ICFI*, May 1990, Remarks by David North, p. 13

[6] *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 18.



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wsws.org/contact