

AUROLA

No 51 Spring 2020
Coronavirus Special

*"Only collaboration
between scientists and
workers can put an end
to oppressive poverty,
disease and dirt."*

Lenin, 1920

Against the Virus that is Capitalism

The world proletariat has in the past celebrated May Day in some dramatic situations: from the imperialist world wars which forced workers to kill, die and produce for their class enemy — their own capitalist class — to the many occasions when the ruling class has unleashed its repressive machine to crush those struggles aimed at making exploitation less onerous, and the chains of the bosses' oppression a little less heavy.

This year, the working class, our class, will be unable to take to the streets. In many cases, workers will not even be able to resort to the usual methods of struggle (pickets, occupations, marches) due to a sneaky enemy, apparently unconnected to capitalist social relations: coronavirus. In reality, this virus is the legitimate offspring of capitalist society, like the "localised" wars that are tormenting millions of people, like the emigrants looking for a less miserable life, like the refugees forced to flee and survive in inhuman conditions, like the environmental disaster that is hitting the living beings of the planet. The relationship between climate upheavals, depredation of the last remaining natural spaces and the spread of "new" pathogens is now a fact ascertained by the vast majority of scientists, at least of those not totally subservient to the powers that be. It is in this capitalist context that the new pandemic has arisen.

The coronavirus pandemic is battering the whole world. It has upset a social and economic order that appeared immutable. It has dramatically laid bare the reality of human relations in this society based on the exploitation of one human being by another in the name of profit.

After years of cuts, thousands, if not millions, of workers have to cope with a broken and dysfunctional health system. Worse still, many more in the so-called emerging countries are faced with a situation where even a half-decent health system has never existed. In these countries, exploitation does not



even have the social cushions — which have been under attack for a long time — that exist in the "West": precarious work, underemployment, starvation wages: in short, "nineteenth-century" exploitation, is the rule. Worst of all are countries like the USA which, despite being the centres of "advanced" capitalism, leave millions and millions of proletarians without health care worthy of the name, because their wages are too low to pay for private insurance. Not to mention the millions of "invisible" super-exploited immigrants without a residence permit who are essential for many sectors of the economy (e.g. agriculture), many of whom remain unemployed, without unemployment benefits, and with no access to medical treatment in general.

The overall picture that emerges is of a health system incapable of curing everyone and which chooses not to save the elderly and the ill, the groups who, so far, have been the greatest victims. They are the sacrificial lambs for a system which, at the same time, has no problem making everyone work into their late 60s and beyond. No matter how much suffering and how many sacrifices the world working class has to endure, as long as this exploitative system exists, it will attack indirect wages (social and health services) and deferred wages (by reducing pensions and delaying retirement age). Wherever these 'flagship' welfare schemes remain, they will be used up to fuel the underpowered engine of the capitalist

economy.

Millions of people, wage workers, are forced to work every day in extremely harmful environments under worsening conditions. In these factories and workplaces any discussion regarding the dangers of the pandemic comes up against the bosses' interests, and the only thing they consider legitimate: their profits.

Never before has the historical crisis of capital been so enormously amplified. This pandemic has exposed the glaring incompatibility between the interests of the bosses and the working class. Never has the fundamental question been more sharply posed: our lives against their profits.

This system, both in the present situation and in the longer term, pretends that we are all equal as citizens as far as our health needs are concerned. The current reality shows that this is not the case.

The coronavirus crisis is highlighting what a state the capitalist system has been in for years and if the pandemic lasts much longer, things will get much, much worse. The rebound effect, which the usual "gurus" predict for the beginning of the fourth quarter of 2020, is a pious illusion. Their projections are based on worthless statistics, just like their analyses of the positive trend of the world economy before the 2008 crisis which, with very few exceptions, they had not predicted.

Now they are predicting a reduction in global GDP of 10-15% by the end of the year with an increase of hundreds of millions of unemployed and underemployed workers. The economic recovery, if indeed there is to be one, will need a lot of time before it can assert itself, and will only be temporary and unresolved in this decadent phase of the capitalist system. Even if, hypothetically and with a great deal of luck, the spectre of Covid-19 goes soon, it is not as if everything will resume as before a week later.

China is economically on its knees: the latest data have estimated its first

Bulletin of the Communist Workers' Organisation Affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency

fall in GDP for half a century. The USA is up to its ears in debt and deficits and, in the space of three weeks from the end of March to the beginning of April, 26 million workers have asked for unemployment benefit, but this is only the beginning. Moreover the apparent prosperity of the United States is only based on the supremacy of the dollar and the most powerful armed forces in the world. Central Europe, Germany included, was already in a technical recession before the pandemic. The signs of a slowdown in the world economy were already obvious last year and the future looks increasingly bleak.

The fresh money that the European Central Bank and the Federal Reserve (both already into trillions of dollars) are supposed to be forking out will inflate the coffers of the banks but go to very few companies. Speculative bubbles will continue since firms' profit rates are too low to justify new investments; though there will be exceptions like the big players, which enjoy the intervention of the State when bank funding is insufficient.

After the very old, health workers and those who are clear victims of the cuts in health services, murdered by capitalism, the others to be hit are the factory workers, and the most oppressed sectors of our class which beyond "normal" exploitation have to endure the racist oppression of the bourgeoisie, working in the most precarious of situations where they are the least paid and most easily blackmailed. It is no accident that the "hotspots" of the epidemic have started precisely where the bosses have forced, and are forcing, workers into work, even if this means enormously increasing the possibility of infection because distancing is either impossible or very difficult. Moreover there is either no personal protective equipment or it is inadequate. The greatest numbers of deaths are to be found in the workers' suburbs of New York and some of the industrial provinces of Northern Italy, to give just two examples.



However, the business world, indifferent to the massacre in progress, is pressing for a return to "normal" as soon as possible, that is, to the production of surplus value in all firms, to the detriment of the health of those both inside and outside the workplace. We hope therefore that workers once again struggle to defend their lives and the health of everyone. The mobilisations in recent weeks, in Europe and in other areas of the world, which have forced the unions to run to keep up with angry workers, have shown us how to transform impotence into resistance, on the basis of our immediate needs, instead of making sacrifices in the name of profit. But this is not enough.

From now on, we need to link the defence of the health of every worker to the perspective of a different society. We need a new social model that no longer puts production in conflict with human health, or with the delicate balance of the natural environment, already massively endangered by the destructive rapacity of capital. Never before has the contradiction between the collective health and well-being of humanity been in such stark contrast to

the logic of profit. Otherwise, the logic of capitalism will be a war which would destroy just about everything, giving the capitalist system economic room for a new cycle of accumulation.

The virus attacking us is capitalism. Fighting this disease means building the communist alternative to this system of exploitation and death. This means connecting with workers to build and secure the political instrument of working class struggle: the internationalist and revolutionary class party, the future International.

We have always been committed to this task but today it is more important than ever, given that the situation is changing rapidly and time is of the essence.

There is an alternative to this system. The task of building it falls on those who are tired of being exploited and used by capitalism. Let's get ready for our appointment with history.

**Internationalist Communist
Tendency, May Day 2020**

What We Stand For

Aurora is published by the Communist Workers' Organisation (CWO).

The CWO stands for a global society where production is for need and not profit (and is therefore sustainable), where the state, national frontiers and money have been abolished, where collective power is exercised through class-wide organisations like workers' councils. This has to mean the active, daily participation of the majority aiming for the interests of all. Only then can the world be rid of the capitalist offspring of poverty, hunger, oppression and war: we call it communism but this vision has nothing in common with Stalinist state capitalism and the old USSR.

In order to get there we are working to create a world working class political organisation – a 'party' for want of a better word – not a government in waiting but a guide in the struggle for a new world. We by no means claim to be that party but we do aim to be one of the elements which will need to come together in its formation. As the working class is more and more faced with the consequences of a crumbling capitalist system it will have to unite and confront capitalist power.

We are not in competition with other organisations but seek to unite on a clearly agreed political programme to prepare the way for the majority of the world's population, the exploited of the earth, to overthrow the capitalist system and its bloody imperialist appetites.

State Control is not Socialism

According to Tom Harris in The Daily Telegraph on 17 March, "we are all socialists now". This was before the UK government's announcement of a £330bn package to help the economy through the coronavirus 'lockdown', but after Virgin Airlines requested a £7.5bn bailout. Other airlines worldwide have also requested aid from their governments. The railways, always a beloved part of the Left's plans for re-nationalisation, have been taken over by the government to prevent the complete collapse of the network during a time of tumbling passenger numbers, but when it's necessary to run at least a skeleton service for key workers to get to work. Meanwhile in the wider financial world, the Bank of England joined the US Federal Reserve and other central banks in a co-ordinated stimulus to prevent the wholesale collapse of the international financial system.

All of this has led to talk about the final end of Thatcherism and the 'return' of socialism. On Saturday 21 March Sky News declared "capitalism has been suspended in the UK". To hear the champions of neoliberalism in the UK's right-wing press, one could be forgiven for thinking that a Maoist guerrilla insurgency had taken Westminster, or at the very least that John McDonnell had organised a coup. Either of these scenarios could be described as 'socialism' by the cheerleaders of British capitalism whose vision of socialist society is one where workers' lives are entirely devoted to a totalitarian state.

Paradoxically, the 'return' of socialism has become a familiar political theme. A year ago, we were writing about the supporters of Corbyn and Sanders to say that 'Socialism is not Statism'. Then, we were warning that social democracy's agenda of reforming capitalism had nothing to offer the working class, even if it could be implemented. Now, 'socialism' is presented as helicopter money to save capitalism from complete collapse — flooding the economy with money to paper over the crisis, with no perspective for tomorrow when capitalism's bills will be due. Ultimately the US establishment — after going through a few days of its own internal wrangling — passed a \$2.2tn support package intended to save capitalism. Having claimed there is no 'magic money tree', the magicians of capitalism have conjured a forest.

Already, we are seeing inflation creeping into the system. The current round of shelf-stripping in UK supermarkets has produced some gross examples. Whether these are due to genuine panic-buying, or perhaps more often the speculative buying of staples, is

difficult to determine but perhaps ultimately doesn't matter. Reports abound of hand-sanitiser on sale at £25 a bottle and toilet roll at £100 for 6. But more insidiously, it has led to a situation where, instead of being able to buy porridge oats for £1.00 a kilo, suddenly all that is available to pensioners and struggling workers is a 200g 'porridge pot', also at £1.00, the same price for 1/5 of the quantity. There is no supermarket own-brand sunflower oil left in the supermarkets, but there is branded extra-virgin olive oil — for 7 times the price.

The reality is, this latest outgrowth of capitalism's continuing crisis will be paid for by the working class — through job-losses, higher taxes, real wage cuts. Governments may be flinging money at the problem now but we will be picking up the bill later, as we have done since the last round of Keynesian boosting of banking assets that was intended to stabilise the economy 12 years ago. The result for a great many workers and their families has been austerity, flatlining wages and a decrease in our quality of life.

But, this is nothing to do with socialism. Socialism is not state intervention to prevent 'social unrest' by providing the bare essentials of existence, much less shortages of basic supplies or emergency curfews. It definitely does not mean essential healthcare workers being thrown out of their homes over fears about their exposure to coronavirus, as reported in the Guardian on 22 March.

Socialist society can only come about when the working class destroys world capitalism and its entire political, legal

and military support apparatus. This world order based on a tiny minority profiting from the unpaid labour of the vast majority is crumbling. A new society without property, money and borders beckons. The working class in the current crisis is in a novel position. It has been given the opportunity to see that a great many of the 'jobs' in capitalism are bogus, and it is a certain number of workers in key fields of production and distribution as well as healthcare who really are vital to continued existence. Whilst it has also become obvious that the free market has utterly failed to meet people's needs, the danger now is that the old discredited message of 'state control of the economy' is seen as a solution.

But there is no solution within the present set-up. What is needed is a working class prepared to fight for a very different future against a capitalism in crisis. Sporadically, the working class is doing so — we have published reports on the class struggle around the world in the current crisis and will continue to do so. But what the working class needs above all is to take up its own independent political programme, the programme of international revolution for the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement with a self-organised community of freely associated producers. The ICT is part of this political process. We do not pretend to be the World Communist Party but we are committed to working towards the formation of that party. We urge all of those who wish to see the end of this inhuman system to contact us and work together to bring about a real socialist future for humanity.



"All in this Together"? A Sick Joke

The myth that we're all in this together is already wearing thin. COVID-19 has come after ten years of grinding austerity characterised by the gig economy, poverty wages, benefit cuts, attacks on the NHS, and a desperate housing crisis. While the richest 1% have got richer, we've had a growth in food banks, child poverty, unaffordable housing and poor health. In fact UK poverty numbers were at their highest level for 18 years even before the coronavirus. Unequal societies are prone to outbreaks of mass disease, and our society gets more unequal with every passing day. Lockdown has shown that this is a public health crisis defined by inequality, and the working class is suffering most.

NHS staff, care workers, transport and supermarket workers are now seen as key workers, but their lives are still not adequately valued. The lack of PPE in hospitals is appalling though not surprising (a lot of the MPs now praising nurses as heroes voted against a pay rise for them 3 years ago). Workers in care homes (mostly on minimum wage), shop and transport workers are vulnerable and dying. In London alone 21 transport workers have died from COVID-19 and some of those still working are so scared they're using shower curtains on their buses for protection.

The whole stay at home message is impossible for a lot of gig economy workers. If they don't work, they don't eat. Most won't be entitled to the 80% wage subsidy, and even those workers who are find that the missing 20% leaves a massive gap in their income (if you're on £9.45 an hour and watching every penny, that loss is massive). So far there's been 1.2 million new benefit claims since the outbreak and unemployment is edging past 3 million, the worst figures in 30 years. The gig economy workers who've lost their jobs and who don't have a computer or access to the internet (since all the libraries are shut) are finding it impossible to claim any benefits. And for those who have managed to claim, there's still a five week wait for all new Universal Credit claimants, though this could get longer because of the high demand.

Which means many more workers are turning to food banks. Almost 2 million people were already undernourished in Britain before coronavirus hit, with one in five children living with an adult experiencing what's officially known as 'food insecurity'. And now there's been a 300% increase in food bank use at a time when the food banks themselves are struggling to stay open. Up and

down the country most food banks are run by volunteers who are older and now self-isolating. And with fewer donations supplies are down while need goes up. Research by the Food Foundation found that 3 million people live in homes where someone has been forced to skip some meals, and 1.5 million people regularly go without food for a whole day because they have no money or access to food. Child poverty was already high (30% of kids were classed as living in poverty). 14 million people, nearly one quarter of the population, were scraping a living before the coronavirus hit. They're now being joined by families who were earning decent money and are now on Universal Credit.

Lockdown for many of these families isn't the same as lockdown for people living in large houses with gardens. If you share a couple of rooms in a flat, self-isolation is a joke. Kids in cramped, overcrowded homes won't get the home schooling middle class families will get. If they don't have the internet, and many of them don't, they're pretty much locked out of the education system. And because of the housing crisis, because rents have been soaring for years, because housing benefit doesn't cover the full cost, a lot of low paid workers have no choice than to break social distancing guidelines and go out to work so their landlords can continue to make a profit. Low paid workers and their families will bear the brunt of this crisis like they bear the brunt of every other, and they won't have the luxury of prioritising their health and safety over paying for food and rent. Already, according to research carried out by *Opinium*, 6 out of 10 renters have suffered financially from the lockdown and 1 in 5 had been forced to choose between paying their rent this month or buying food. 1 in 4 had already moved out to live with friends or family, knowing they couldn't afford to keep going. Private landlords have access to mortgage holidays but they don't have to pass this on to their tenants, who have mostly been left to pay rent with no income and a 5 week wait for benefits. And they'll be left to pay hundreds or thousands of pounds of rent arrears when lockdown's over.

Private landlords aren't alone in cashing in. Utility companies haven't been asked to make any sacrifices, nor have the banks who are enjoying government loan guarantees which gives them protection from the risk of extending credit to struggling businesses. Some companies wanting to downsize have seen the perfect opportunity to lay off workers or are



just taking the opportunity to pocket government support and refusing to top up wages from their own accounts. Then there's the hedge funds who are making billions from market bets during the pandemic (one London hedge fund, Ruffer Investment, made £2.4bn as investors panicked about the global shutdown).

We have no idea how many people will die because of this pandemic, but the most vulnerable of our class are the bulk of the sick and dying. Yet when the lockdown is over and the politicians, businesses and trade union leaders focus on getting the system of profit-making back on its feet again we can be sure that the 'new normal' for the working class will be worse than ever. The virus isn't the cause of the capitalist crisis, it's a symptom of it. The real sickness is capitalism itself. Now is a good time to start thinking of a better way to organise society and create one that'll look after everyone, and not take workers' lives for granted.

