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A Crisis of Capitalist “Civilisation”

More than 650,000 official deaths, 130 million on the edge of starvation, hundreds of millions potentially out of work. And still counting. This is the scale of the catastrophe that has spread around the world over the past months. The powers that be have responded with lockdowns and bailouts to minimise the effect of the coronavirus on the economy and preserve the current system. The ruling class attempts to portray this as just a hiccup – give it some time and we'll go back to business as usual, as if nothing had happened. But this is not an isolated incident, it is the direct consequence of the impact that capitalist society has had on the planet over the past 300 years.

Technological and scientific advances – in education, medicine, entertainment, transport, or communication – have changed the ways we interact with the world and each other. But all this "progress" has also meant more and more wealth for the ruling class (26 people now own as much as the poorest half of the world's population). And despite the development of the productive forces which could free up our time to devote ourselves to a better quality of life, we are still plagued by long working hours (or its flip side, unemployment), hunger wages and impoverishment. Not only that, the search for maximum profit has ended up heavily affecting the relationship between human society and nature.

Capitalism and Nature

Recently in the news, it was reported that 500 species are on course to go extinct in the next two decades. News like this is now a common occurrence. Earth is becoming uninhabitable for large swathes of human and animal life. Urbanisation has concentrated humans in metropolises for the sake of capital accumulation; these metropolises, on the one hand, require colossal amounts of consumption and, on the other, release their waste and pollution into the ecosystem. Deforestation has decimated the "green lungs" of the world in order to satisfy demand for wood, paper, beef, palm oil and soy. Intensive farming involves the use of antibiotics, pesticides and even anabolic substances that end up on the tables of consumers who are unaware of what they are forced to eat. Microplastics have found their way even to the disintegrating ocean floor and the melting Antarctic ice. And all of this, and more, has caused untold damage to land and water, directly or indirectly leading to global warming which intensifies extreme weather conditions.

This is having immediate effects on human life. Heat waves, droughts, floods, blizzards and rainstorms torment those of us living on the capitalist periphery, but now they are gradually felt even in the metropolises. What's more, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the products we buy, the places we work at, the houses we live

in, the ways we travel, in other words, everything we interact with on a daily basis poses long term risks: we have become a breeding ground for various cancers, bacteria, and of course viruses. Research suggests that air pollution can act as a convenient vector for the transmission of the coronavirus itself. So it is not empty rhetoric to launch the slogan that "the virus is capitalism" and that only by getting rid of capitalism is it possible to save humanity from being increasingly crushed by the iron grip of a decaying society which is wreaking havoc across our planet.

The Virus is Capitalism

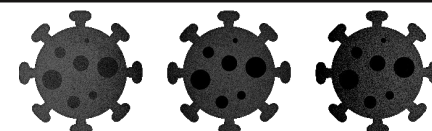
Humanity will pay (and many of us already are) a heavy price for the way capitalism exploits the natural world. But we will not pay equally. The working class – those who under threat of starvation are forced to sell their labour power, spending much of our life in workplaces which are either socially useless or straight up harmful, will bear the brunt of it. Those who have made the decisions which led us here in the first place, who control the parliaments, who own the businesses, for whom we make profits – that ruling class has the means to secure its existence (just consider who had access to coronavirus tests and treatment first!). We, as it stands, do not.

Capitalism's destruction of the environment is a direct result of the

system's relentless drive for increased profits and growth. The two possible ways it can achieve these things will only make the environmental catastrophe worse. The first consists of super-exploitation based on the lengthening of the working day, increased production rates, holding down wages, reducing pensions and, more generally, on the further dismantling of welfare. The second "solution" would be a war that would destroy everything in order to rebuild everything, giving the capitalist system the economic space for a new cycle of accumulation.

We are exploited every day, making the profits that keep this system going. We are the fuel to the fire. But it does not have to be this way. If we recognise our power, as the class which produces and provides for the whole of humanity, we can change the script. What we are seeing right now is a crisis of capitalist "civilisation". We can build a different world – based on global cooperation, production for need, not profit. Such a society cannot be realised within the limits of this system, premised as it is on class division, accumulation of wealth, and oppression. Only the resumption of class struggle on an international scale can save us from yet more carnage (be it war, another crash, or ecological collapse). Against all the "solutions" proposed by financial gurus, reformist politicians, or reactionaries, we have to pose our own alternative.

Pandemic Politics in the UK



In the UK, the coronavirus crisis has brutally exposed the significance of the endless cuts to the NHS as well as the incompetence of the Johnson government. From failure to organise protective equipment for medical staff to the catastrophic decision to return elderly COVID-19 patients to care-homes, the shambles of the bespoke track-and-trace scheme and shipwreck of the scheme to re-open schools in England, the government has lurched from fiasco to debacle.



When they finally stopped prevaricating over lockdown, the message was that "we are all in this together". Then, with families broken up and unable to visit elderly or dying relatives, attend funerals or comfort bereaved loved ones, be at the births of children, hold or attend weddings or visit partners, in a series of demonstrations that there is one law for "us" and one for "them", there was a string of high-profile breaches of the lockdown regulations by government advisors or even family — Stanley Johnson, the Prime

Minister's father, visited his new grandson; Dominic Cummings took his family to visit his parents ... and so on and so forth.

Though it can't be accused of having a coherent or explicable plan behind the measures taken, the government was forced to throw a massive amount of money at the problem. Even towards the end of July, there are still 9 million people on the government's furlough scheme, being paid 80% of their basic wage not to work. This is approximately the same number of people that went on strike during the general strike in France in May 1968. The cost of the furlough scheme, which is running at £14 billion a month, looks massive, but in context, the government has already given more than £40 billion in loans to companies to help them retain staff and re-open when the lockdown ends. The UK is certainly in crisis. None of the problems of British — or world — capitalism have gone away. 650,000 jobs have already been lost. Even so, the Financial Times estimates there will be 23,700 company insolvencies this year alone and a further 31,500 in 2021. Meanwhile the government's "Debt Management Office" is planning to issue a record £533bn of debt to "finance the pandemic response".

These kinds of payments can be made in the short term but will have to be paid for in the long term. And we know who will be expected to pay! Capitalism cannot survive

without increasing the exploitation of the working class, creating unemployment and reducing real wages. It is perhaps a measure of how desperate the ruling class is that it is prepared to spend so lavishly now in an attempt to save the system.

The COVID crisis however is merely an excuse, a mask for the real problem which is the ongoing crisis of capitalism.

The Johnson administration was elected to 'get Brexit done' and though officially the UK left the EU on 31st January, negotiations have stalled. Britain looks increasingly isolated diplomatically and is now forced to bow to American pressure, for example over the involvement of Huawei in the 5G network. This has increased tensions with China over Hong Kong and obliged the UK to make noises about human rights abuses of the Uighurs in Xinjiang Province. At the same time, Russian penetration of UK institutions have gone beyond claims about Russian interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2019 election. Both at home and abroad, British imperialism is weak and vulnerable.

For the Working Class, There is Another Way

So far, during this period of crisis for the British state, some workers have been moved to resist. There were walkouts at the beginning of the pandemic on some

construction sites in protest against poor health and safety practices; there was some action in hospitals against failures to supply PPE; some transport workers were able to force employers (including Transport for London) to fit screens to protect both drivers and passengers; the government's scheme for a phased re-opening of primary schools (primarily, a way of getting parents back to work) was brought to nothing in a week, as teachers and parents forced unions, then councils, then central government itself, to abandon the plan. In Tower Hamlets, East London, council workers have been striking over new contracts. If the government's recent announcement of above-average pay-rises to public-sector workers is an attempt to head off further anger, then it has failed. Health workers who were excluded from this deal are already preparing to protest.

But at the moment it isn't enough. Until workers come together across boundaries of workplace and sector to fight for their collective interests, the capitalists will be able to buy off or crush the partial struggles that arise. The task of communists in the struggles ahead is always to point out the common interests of the class and seek to unite these struggles so that the working class can ultimately challenge the whole capitalist order — though perhaps capitalist disorder is a more apt term.

Unrest in the USA: A Perfect Storm

The spread of COVID-19 to the United States earlier this year both triggered and exacerbated the economic crisis which has been building up for decades. Around 50 million workers in America have been thrown out of work since the start of the lockdown, the great majority of whom have no alternative source of income for the necessities of life. A meagre \$1200 “stimulus cheque” was issued by the federal government in March – this, at a time when the average rental price of a flat is over \$1400 per month, and the average mortgage payment is around \$1500 per month. Slowly but surely, as savings and credit have dried up, non-repayment rates have risen, and by July just under one third of Americans were failing to meet their housing payments in full. The spectre of homelessness (which had already risen by over 140% in the decade preceding the pandemic) now looms over the heads of many American workers.

Thus, for instance, evictions in the city of Milwaukee are up by 37%, and by May the homeless population of San Francisco’s “tent cities” had already tripled in comparison to its pre-lockdown level. Life in such conditions is hardly conducive to social distancing, and homeless shelters, like care homes and prisons, have been ravaged by COVID. Coronavirus mortality amongst residents of homeless shelters in New York is 61% higher than the city’s average. At a single homeless shelter in California, over 90 residents were found to have contracted the virus. In Las Vegas, the homeless were initially “sheltered” in the open air of a parking lot in the shadow of several vacant casino-hotels.

We can see that the working class has been presented with the following “choice”: return to work, enrich your masters, and maintain the roof over your head, at the risk of a slow and painful death in a hospital bed that you probably cannot afford to occupy; or don’t return to work, join the growing ranks of the homeless and itinerant, and in so doing make yourself even more likely to contract the coronavirus and die. Damned if you do, twice damned if you don’t – and that’s if the police don’t get their hands on you first.

George Floyd

On May 25th, four armed agents of the American state crushed a man to death as he cried out for his late mother. Police killings of black people – particularly black men – are not uncommon occurrences, but the casually brutal and arbitrary nature of George Floyd’s murder was particularly outrageous. What followed was a wave of riots, demonstrations, and protests against



police violence on a scale unknown to America since the 1960s.

Faced with such a crisis, the capitalist class and their state have two tools at their disposal: repression and recuperation. Whilst using one hand to brutally suppress any riots which pose a threat to its bottom line of investments, the capitalist class uses its other hand to draft heartfelt statements in support of “black lives”. Since the unrest began, police forces across America have murdered dozens of people in the name of “law and order” – a thinly veiled euphemism for capitalist property relations, the same property relations that the police were enforcing when they murdered George Floyd over a \$20 note. At the same time, the chief executives of Citibank, Nike, JPMorgan Chase, and Walmart are all quite happy to release saccharine statements (or perform similarly asinine gestures such as “taking a knee”) whilst consigning untold millions of people of colour all over the world to lives of unmitigated drudgery in the name of capital accumulation. They do

so whilst perfectly secure in the knowledge that their investments both at home and abroad are protected by a colossal militarised security state. It is for this reason that the call for “police abolition” can only ever be a utopian and unrealisable demand within a capitalist society. So long as the objective basis for policing continues to exist – and such a basis will necessarily exist so long as there are relations of private property to enforce and maintain – the police itself cannot be abolished. Abolishing the police requires the abolition of capitalism.

The Working Class

Through all of this, our class has not been dormant. Besides the cross-racial solidarity demonstrated in the aftermath of the George Floyd’s murder, the past few months have seen significant working class resistance. Much of this has been without – and indeed against – the established labour movement and the unions, particularly the monolithic AFL–CIO which has once again demonstrated its true class allegiance by standing firmly beside the police unions. But so long as these protests and strikes remain unconnected and directionless, the twin strategies of repression and recuperation will continue to be effective. Only when the working class acts in full solidarity across racial lines as a class will it be able to move forward to secure its own means of existence, whether from the ravages of disease, unemployment, and homelessness on one flank, or from the brutally racialised enforcement of the private property regime on the other.

Why the Working Class is Key

Some may wonder why we keep harping on about the working class. Let’s briefly explain...

The working class consists of all those who work for a wage producing the goods and providing the services that make up the economic life of the country (and the world). You might be a retail cashier, a waiter, a picker/packer, a carer, a teacher, a nurse, a bus driver, a cleaner, a courier, or a boilermaker. Wherever you live, whoever you are and whatever specific activity you carry out you have one thing in common – you sell your labour-power in order to survive. The people who own the means of production – whether they are private shareholders or the state – and employ your labour-power, paying you a wage in return, make up the ruling or capitalist class. Although as workers we create all value in this society, it is the capitalist class which profits from it. Between these two classes there is an irresolvable conflict of interest – we want our wages and conditions to be better, while the capitalists want to increase their profits at the least expense.

The working class is in a unique position – if we stopped working, the whole system would grind to a halt. The spectre of unemployment is there to prevent that from happening. Today, those of us

working in key industries have been branded “essential workers”, meaning even under a pandemic we get no respite – we are forced to continue selling our labour-power to produce their profits even when it means risking our lives to do so. And the government, ever worried about the economy, has now hurried to re-start production even in “non-essential” sectors.

This social relationship between labour and capital forms the basis of the modern world order. But society has not always been organised this way. 500 years ago you may have been a peasant paying in rent and obligatory services to your landlord so you could toil on their land. 2,000 years ago you may have been a slave abducted and subject to your master. And 10,000 years ago you may have been a hunter-gatherer working in common with your tribe. No society is eternal, which raises the question: what’s the future after wage-labour and how do we get there?

Although we may feel powerless today, our unique position also means we have the power to bring this system and those who champion it to their knees. Together we can change society on a scale no other class can equal. The capitalist class needs us to make their profits, we don’t need the capitalist class to create life’s essentials. At times of crisis, the working class has in the

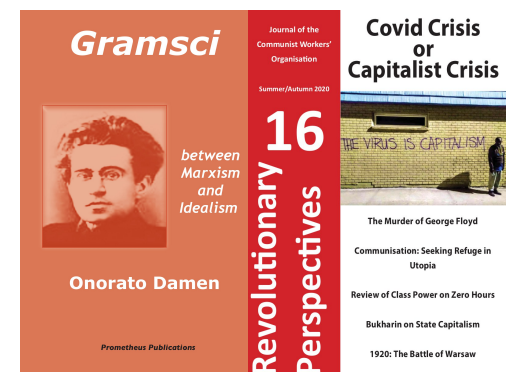
past attempted to emancipate itself, and dates such as 1871 (Paris Commune) and 1917 (Russian Revolution) should be ingrained in our consciousness. These attempts may have been unsuccessful, being either crushed by force or brought back into the fold by the ruling class, but they have left us important lessons.

Recent events have illuminated just how much the capitalist system is rotten to its core. Contradictions stemming from the labour-capital relation have been brought to the fore. The ruling class has their own political compass to guide them through the storms, and we need to find our own. Our aim is to work for the creation of an internationalist organisation of the working class, which can link immediate demands of the separate struggles of today, with the historical programme of communism – a

stateless, classless, moneyless society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”.

That is why to every picket and every protest we bring a class perspective, the only one that can seriously address the multidimensional crises we face today. We don’t have to choose between the drudgery of wage-labour and the misery of unemployment – we have a world to win!

Now available:



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.

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