

Coronavirus and Capitalism

MARCH 29 – Since the beginning of the year 2020, the world has been thrown into an unprecedented crisis by what is now the pandemic of the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19. First appearing in Wuhan, China, after some initial missteps it has largely been brought under control by the extraordinary measures enacted by the Chinese government. Beijing managed to limit the spread by imposing different levels of restrictions of movement of people, between provinces and within cities, covering from 400 million to 700 million people – the largest quarantine in history. This sharply reduced infections and fatalities: the number of cases has been limited to a little over 80,000 and the number of dead to 3,300, almost all in Hubei province where the disease was first detected.

But now COVID-19 is racing through the capitalist world, ravaging whole regions such as northern Italy, largely due to the criminal failure and outright refusal of the authorities, political and medical, to test widely and quarantine when the numbers of infected were small. In the United States, at least half the entire population (160 million as of March 27) is now on lockdown, ordered by city and state government to “shelter in place.” In New York City, now the epicenter



Hundreds stood for hours outside Elmhurst Hospital in heavily immigrant Corona, Queens, New York waiting to get tested in tent outside the emergency room for coronavirus. Some were never seen. Of those who tested positive, most are sent home. Doctors described the scene inside the hospital as “apocalyptic.”

of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, the number of documented cases is skyrocketing, up 600% in ten days since serious testing has begun. Scenes in some emergency rooms

are described as “apocalyptic,” such as at Elmhurst Hospital in Corona, Queens, where 13 people died in one day.

Across the U.S., much of the economy

has shut down. Last week, 3.3 million people applied for unemployment insurance, by far the largest number at one time since the pro-

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For Class-Struggle Unionism! Organize the Unorganized! No Safety, No Work!

As the COVID-19 Pandemic Rages, Workers Fight for Health and Safety

APRIL 13 – The class struggle does not shut down during a “natural” disaster – if anything it intensifies. Contrary to the deceptively reassuring and hypocritical “we’re all in this together” rhetoric of the politicians, the stark realities of life or death expose the fundamentally opposed interests of the exploiters and the exploited – at least for those who dare to see. And the capitalist rulers never “let a good crisis go to waste.” That is why, for the working class and all the oppressed, desperate and tragic times cry out for revolutionary leadership.

As the deadly coronavirus pandemic has spread throughout the United States, some 95% of the population is under “stay at home” orders by state governments and local municipalities. Effective quarantine measures are key to combating the COVID-19 public health emergency, which has already led to over 20,000 deaths in the U.S. and 110,000 worldwide, while actual numbers are certainly far higher. At the same time, millions of workers continue to go to work, performing vital tasks while facing grave risks to their health and lives.

This includes, first of all, nurses, doctors, orderlies and other health-care workers



Sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania refuse to work without adequate protective equipment, March 25.

in the front ranks of this battle, heroically treating the sick, often in horrendously overcrowded medical facilities. In New York City, currently the epicenter of the outbreak in the U.S., there have been protests at a number of major hospitals over the lack of vital personal protective equipment (PPE). In many cases, hospital administrators have disciplined and even fired those who have

spoken out against their criminal disregard for employees’ lives.

Meanwhile, in nursing homes, group homes and similar facilities, frequently horrendous conditions for highly vulnerable patients combine with management’s rampant disregard for employees’ health and working conditions.

In addition, the frontline workers in-

clude millions of others – among them public transit workers, postal workers and delivery workers, as well as grocery store, drug store, deli, food service, cleaning and other service workers – whose labor is indeed essential to supplying those who remain at home with vital necessities. In New York City, four out of five of these frontline workers are African American, Hispanic and Asian, almost half are foreign-born, often earning poverty pay, while those who can work from home are predominantly middle-class and white.

We have noted that in some places politically connected real-estate magnates initially got the construction industry declared “essential,” endangering workers’ lives to fuel speculative profits. This led to protests, and on April 6 over 10,000 Carpenters union members in Massachusetts refused to show up for work at new housing and infrastructure projects, protesting unsanitary conditions. At least two dozen union members had tested positive for the coronavirus; hundreds had symptoms and were self-quarantining. The *Engineering News Record* (April 6) reported:

“The International Union of Painters and
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Brian Smith/KDKA

Detained Immigrants in Mortal Danger: Set Them Free! Shut Down I.C.E. Jails Now!

Some of those most endangered by the coronavirus pandemic are the more than 35,000 immigrants (including over 6,000 children) being held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) detention centers. With detainees jammed together in close quarters, often in unsanitary conditions, the accelerating spread of the virus could quickly turn these jails into death camps. By I.C.E.'s own figures, over half of detainees tested proved positive for COVID-19.

In U.S. prisons, where over 2 million mainly black and Latino people languish, at least 168 prisoners have died as new outbreaks of the virus hit the dungeons of the racist ruling class. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has used the crisis as a pretext to "seal the border" with Mexico and freeze all processing of applications for residency ("green cards") while continuing to deport thousands every month, including those infected with COVID-19.

As desperate prisoners engaged in hunger strikes, dozens of protests across the U.S. have demanded that the detainees be set free. With most of the country under quarantine, protesters have turned to car caravans circling I.C.E. facilities and government offices. Supporters of the Internationalist Group, Revolutionary Internationalist Youth and Class Struggle Education Workers participated, but with revolutionary politics counterposed to those of the liberal organizers. ■



Internationalist photo

IG, RIY and CSEW at protest outside Manhattan office of NY governor Cuomo, April 1.

NJ: "Democratic Party, No Solution Smash I.C.E. With Workers Revolution"



Internationalist photo

On April 1 a caravan protest was held in Newark, New Jersey, beginning at the Peter Rodino Federal Building and then proceeding to the Essex County Jail, where I.C.E. detainees are being held. The protest caravan, initiated by several immigrants' rights groups, was about 20 cars, and up to 50 people.

The Internationalist Group and Class Struggle Education Workers joined in the caravan, although with notably different slogans on their signs than those of the liberal organizers. One read "Democratic Party Is No Solution, Smash I.C.E. with Workers Revolution."

One of our signs called for "Workers

Action to Stop Deportations." The importance of this was underlined by the number of big trucks passing by honking in solidarity on their way to the Port Newark Container Terminal. In Newark as elsewhere around the country, a large proportion of port truckers are immigrants.

At the Essex County jail police harassed protesters, accusing them of being illegally parked – in the parking lot! – and taking down license plates. This is the same I.C.E. facility where early on, detainees held a courageous hunger strike last month protesting that they were threatened with death by being incarcerated during the coronavirus crisis. ■

NYC: "For Workers Action to Stop Deportations"

On Friday, April 24, almost 100 protesters – in cars, on bicycles, and "socially distanced" on foot – demonstrated outside New York governor Andrew Cuomo's Midtown Manhattan office, demanding that Cuomo release I.C.E. detainees.

Called by La Cosecha, Close the Camps NYC and the New York Sanctuary Coalition, cars and bicyclists circled the block, honking and chanting, while Internationalist Group supporters and others formed a row of protesters at the building entrance. From Cuomo's office, protesters marched to Times Square. Those in cars and on bikes continued on, protesting at a Westside I.C.E. "investigations" office.

Protesters demanded "Free them all!" and "Close the camps!" Many of them called on Governor Cuomo to "do the right thing" by ordering release of the detainees.

In contrast, the IG, Revolutionary

Internationalist Youth and Class Struggle Education Workers chanted "Let them go, set them free, overthrow the bourgeoisie!" While Democratic Party liberals called to "Abolish I.C.E.!" (to be replaced by a supposedly more "humane" immigration agency), the Internationalists called to "Smash I.C.E. through workers revolution."

Others of our placards included "For Workers Action to Stop Deportations!" "Full Citizenship Rights for All Immigrants" and "Break with the Democrats – For a Class Struggle Workers Party."

The fight to defend and protect immigrants must be linked to the struggle against the capitalist system, which represses and deports immigrant workers as part of its normal workings, to divide the working class and maintain its racist rule. ■

L.A.: "Democrats, Republicans, Parties of Militarism & Racist Terror"



Internationalist photo

On March 31, a drive-by protest was held outside the Metropolitan Detention Center. The caravan was initiated by Never Again Action. Protesters in some 130 cars participated, proceeding slowly, with signs taped to their cars. In addition to calling to "Set Them Free!" most of the slogans were liberal/moral appeals. Several left groups participated, including Red Flag, a split from Progressive Labor, Democratic Socialists of America ("Detention Is Deadly") and the RCP with its pro-Democratic Party calls to "Drive Out the Trump-Pence Regime."

Supporters of the Internationalist Group and Revolutionary International-

ist Youth participated in the caravan with signs calling for "Full Citizenship Rights for All Immigrants," "For Workers Action to Stop Deportations" and "Democrats & Republicans, Twin Parties of U.S. Militarism and Anti-Immigrant Terror."

After several laps around the detention center, some anti-immigrant right-wingers showed up. One had an American flag and a hat calling to "Build the Wall." Another with a Navy cap, a camouflage Kevlar vest and sporting a large knife began ripping signs off cars in the caravan, including some of our signs, while threatening those inside. The police predictably took no action. ■

Visit the League for the Fourth International/
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Defend China Against Imperialist Threats and Trade War!

U.S. Response to Coronavirus: China-Bashing and War Moves

On April 21, an incursion by U.S. warships in the South China Sea ramped up the continual provocations in which the U.S. repeatedly trespasses into China's territorial waters. The amphibious assault ship *America* and guided missile cruiser *Bunker Hill* "entered contested waters off Malaysia," reported the *New York Times* (22 April), adding that the Pentagon had posted photos showing the presence of a destroyer, the *Barry*, as well. They were accompanied by an Australian frigate, the *Parmatta*, "as part of a previously planned operation," according to "defense experts." The "expeditionary strike group" was operating, so said the U.S. Navy, "in support of security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region." Of course, no one is supposed to take the war-planners' claims seriously.

This incursion could presage aggressive moves against the several islands, shoals and reefs in this strategic waterway where China has established military and research facilities to ward off imperialist attack. While the U.S. claims it is there to "promote freedom of navigation," the *Times* noted: "The Chinese government has countered that the United States is the country destabilizing the region. The appearance of the *America* and the *Bunker Hill* may do little to dispel that narrative." It quoted an analyst from a Singapore think tank: "The optics for the U.S. Navy in the region don't look so good.... China can say, 'Look at our superior governance system, which has beaten back the epidemic. And then look at the U.S.'"

The military escalation is part of a campaign by the administration of Republican president Donald Trump to target China in order to divert attention from the U.S.' disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and boost his reelection prospects. With over 50,000 lives lost in a little over a month and unemployment the highest since the 1930s Depression, "Republicans increasingly believe that elevating China as an archenemy culpable for the spread of the virus, and harnessing America's growing



U.S. Navy expeditionary strike force accompanied by Australian Navy helicopter ship (in lead) provocatively trespasses in China's territorial waters in the South China Sea, April 21.

animosity toward Beijing" could salvage the election, reported the *Times* (20 April). At the same time, presumptive Democratic candidate Joe Biden released a video attacking Trump for praising Chinese president Xi Jinping and not denouncing China's handling of the coronavirus enough.

The latest U.S. warship moves are no surprise to China. After the Chinese Navy expelled the U.S. guided missile destroyer *McCampbell* that provocatively sailed near the Xisha (Paracel) Islands, Beijing-based naval analyst Li Jie told the *Global Times* (11 March): "The U.S. sees the South China Sea as the 'main battlefield' against China and is expected to increase actions even further in the future, because it has increasingly lost influence and control over the South China Sea." In response to U.S. warships trespassing into the South China Sea three times within a week, Chinese military experts suggested use of non-lethal electromagnetic weapons "that can potentially jam electronic devices of target vessels and will not cause casualties."

The fact that the Navy's incursion is not merely "showing the flag" but part of a plan for stepped up U.S. military action against China was shown by the request earlier in the month by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command for an additional \$20.1

billion to fund the "Regain the Initiative" strategy of INDOPACOM commander, Admiral Phil Davidson. The request focuses on infrastructure to "spread the U.S. military around the region, breaking the longstanding network of large, centralized bases now seen as easy targets for China's long-distance capabilities" (*Defense News*, 2 February). This includes prepositioning airfield runway rapid repair kits ("The US Air Force has unconventional plans to win a war in the Asia-Pacific," *Defense News*, 10 February).

These military moves, as well as trade war targeting China, ultimately aim at destroying the People's Republic of China, a bureaucratically deformed workers state. As supporters of the program of international socialist revolution of Bolshevik leaders V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the League for the Fourth International unconditionally defends China against military and economic aggression by the imperialists. We support China standing its ground in the South China Sea, including by land reclamation and development of strategic bases aimed at thwarting attack by U.S. imperialism along with its junior partner Australia, imperialist Japan, U.S.-armed capitalist Taiwan and their regional allies in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Bipartisan Anti-China War Drive

The current aggressive military posture against China did not start with Trump, but rather with Obama. In 2010, Obama announced a "pivot to Asia," meaning military encirclement of China. The U.S. announced it was shifting over half of its naval assets to the Asian-Pacific "theater," including most nuclear and high-tech naval vessels and at least six aircraft carriers. The Pentagon has also greatly expanded its bases in South Korea, opened a new base in Australia, and negotiated the use of bases in the Philippines. This "pivot" meant a pullback in the wars and conflicts it was mired in the Middle East. Thus Washington did not take command of the NATO assault on Libya in 2011, the first time that the U.S. did not directly lead a NATO operation.

Obama also ramped up economic aggression against China, the key piece of which was his Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The 12-country free trade agreement pointedly excluded China on the basis that state-owned companies constitute "unfair competition." (Acting as a cat's paw for U.S. imperialism, the Vietnamese deformed workers state shamefully participated in the TPP, and is a member of ASEAN, which from its inception was an anti-Communist alliance.)¹ The TPP was primarily a means to contain China economically, establishing rules on "anti-competitive practices," such as collective planning, and instituting a series of penalties against "offenders," i.e., China. The stillborn agreement was junked by Trump when he took office.

As in many other areas, in relation to China Trump has mainly continued Obama's policies. Instead of the TPP, Trump started a trade war in 2018, claiming that "trade wars are easy to win." Instead,

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¹ The Hanoi bureaucracy's collaboration with the very U.S. imperialists that devastated their country – and that were defeated by the heroic Vietnamese workers and peasants – is yet another example of how Stalinism, with its nationalist dogma pitting one "socialism in one country" against another, undermines and threatens the very existence of all the workers states.



Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy patrolling the South China Sea in 2018.



U.S. Navy spy plane over the South China Sea in 2018.

While Chinese Workers State Contained Outbreak Coronavirus Pandemic Ravages Italy, Overwhelms Capitalist Medical System

Screenshot from New York Times video



Intensive care patients in hospital corridors in Bergamo province, March 2020.

APRIL 4 – Italy is where the novel coronavirus COVID-19 hit Western Europe first and hardest. The result has been devastating, dramatically exposing the inability of the capitalist system to protect the lives of the population, much less provide adequate medical care. The extremely high mortality (as of April 4, over 15,362 dead out of some 125,000 confirmed cases),¹ overwhelmingly among the elderly, has shaken the country, which has a much higher number of very old people than elsewhere in Europe. The lack of medical equipment has led to doctors triaging infected patients, in effect deciding whom they would let die. Meanwhile, the seriously belated quarantine measures are simultaneously leaky in major cities like Milan and enforced with a heavy hand by police, *Carabinieri* (paramilitary national police force) and the military elsewhere.

The criminally passive response by the authorities in the early stages, when it would have been possible to more effectively contain the spread of the virus, has become notorious, with the head of the ruling bourgeois Democratic Party posting a video at the end of February urging Italians “not to change our habits,” only to post a second video ten days later of himself having fallen ill from the coronavirus. But the exploding public health disaster in Italy reflects the massive cuts in health care that have been carried out particularly since the onset of the world capitalist economic crisis in 2007-08. Over the past decade, €37 billion (US\$40 billion) has been slashed from public health, 70,000 hospital beds have disappeared and 359 hospital departments have been closed. In Italy the number of hospital beds per 1,000 people is 3.2, compared to 6 in France and 8 in Germany.

Already two years ago, the *Nurse Times* (11 June 2018) quoted the condemnation made by the SMI (an Italian doctors trade union) at its national congress in Naples:

“The hiring freeze has been in place for ten years, resulting in a bizarre mix of

contracts, some freelance, some by the day and some by the hour, thereby burning out an entire generation of professionals: public employees overall have lost something like €10 billion a year.

“During the congress we were also reminded that in the near future, the retirement of health workers and their not being replaced (19,000 general doctors and 55,000 specialists) will lead to the *disappearance of health care for citizens*.”

By mid-March, in Lombardy in northern Italy, the center of the crisis, temporary intensive care units were set up in corridors, operating rooms, recovery rooms. Other hospital departments were cleared out and regular medical visits cancelled. The provinces of Bergamo and Brescia have been so overloaded that facilities there could not accept new patients, while in much of Lombardy they are close to collapse. Patients, both with coronavirus and without, are being transferred to other parts of Italy, a fraught task. Doctors, nurses and other health-care workers have for weeks been working 12-hour shifts, or more, and have already been pushed beyond the limit.

The mayor of Bergamo, Giorgio Goro, has said that the gap between resources and the enormous flux of patients “forced the doctors to decide not to intubate some very



Police at checkpoint in Viale Porpora in Milan stop drivers during the lockdown, March 2020.



Fabio Bucciarelli

Italian army has been called in to move the dead from warehouses to crematoria.

old patients,” essentially leaving them to die. Other health workers declare “we are forced to choose between people in their 40’s and people in their 60’s.” The doctors cry out, “It is a catastrophe.” With an acute shortage of ambulances, it can reportedly take up to an hour for one to respond to emergency calls. This delay can be fatal for those with heart attacks and serious respiratory crises. The shortage of medical personnel is so acute that even the xenophobic ultra-rightist government of the fascistic Lega in Lombardy has appealed for Chinese, Cuban and Venezuelan health workers to go to there to help. All three of these countries are now sending aid.

At last count, more than 10,600 nurses and health-care workers have been infected by the coronavirus and 77 doctors have died from it. The doctors trade union Anao-Assomed says the number of fatalities among medical personnel continues to grow and condemns the “persistent insufficiency” of personal protective equipment, starting with surgical masks. Doctors are “left naked before the virus,” it declared. The regional health director of Lombardy, Giulio Gallera, complained that surgical masks that arrived from the national Civil Protection authorities were little better than “toilet paper.”

Lombardy saw early outbreaks, due

to intense commercial and travel contact with China, where the coronavirus was first detected. But reports also show that the failure to stop much of the ordinary daily commute of over 700,000 people on the Milan metro (subway) and buses has meant that the infection continues to be spread every day. The left press and even some bourgeois media have shown pictures of jam-packed metro cars with people literally squeezed together. So what has been advertised outside of Italy as something close to a “total lockdown” in reality hasn’t been that. Also, there has been far from enough testing.

There are a number of additional reasons why COVID-19 spread much more extensively in Lombardy than in other parts of Italy. One is football (soccer) tourism, with tens of thousands of fans traveling from city to city. But particularly important is the fact that in Lombardy, the richest part of Italy, health care has been largely privatized as more people can afford to bypass long waiting lists in public hospitals. These private clinics covered up the existence of coronavirus in their facilities in order to avoid being closed down.² Instead, they listed the illness as asthma, old age or respiratory problems. People suspected of having COVID-19 were sent home to self-isolate, where unknowingly, they infected family members, who in turn infected many others. They were not placed in isolation centers attended by medical personnel, as happened in China. This made a huge difference.

China: The Superiority of a Planned Economy

In contrast to this bleak and terrifying picture of the situation in capitalist Italy, where the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage out of control and where some scenes recall paintings of medieval plagues, by mid-March, China had largely (but not completely) beaten back the pandemic. New infections in China, once about 2,500

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² “Perché in Lombardia si muore?” (Why Are People Dying in Lombardy), 22 March, at: <https://www.tpi.it/opinioni/coronavirus-perche-lombardia-si-muore-errori-fontana-commento-selvaggia-lucarelli-20200322570859/>

Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

Crews Held Hostage as Virus Rages – Unionize Seafaring Workers!

Let Cruise Workers Off Death Ships Now!

Solidarity with the Trapped Seamen: We Demand Testing, Treatment, Housing, Union-Scale Wages and the Right to Repatriation!

**By Jack Heyman
and Jan Norden**

The novel coronavirus pandemic has hit frontline workers around the world. First and foremost, many health and hospital workers who have heroically been treating patients with COVID-19 have themselves been stricken and more than 500 have died (Medscape, 21 April). Maritime workers, who are a key logistical link in the global capitalist economy, including the 1.2 million seamen in the shipping industry, as well as port workers, have also been hit hard.

Particularly vulnerable have been crews on giant cruise ships, not only deck hands and engine room workers but also hundreds of food service, cleaning and maintenance personnel and others. With up to 3,000 passengers and over 1,000 crew members crammed together in tight spaces, “social distancing” is impossible. The densely packed vessels act as incubators, greatly accelerating the transmission of COVID-19, turning these party ships into death ships.¹ In the case of the *Diamond Princess*, held in quarantine off Yokohama, Japan for 24 days, some 712 passengers and crew members became infected with the virus, and 14 died.

But this horrendous experience was not unique. At least 27 cruise ships have reported confirmed cases of coronavirus. In one case, the Holland America Lines *Zaandam* was stranded off southern Chile in mid-March and could find no port on the west coast of South America

¹ Almost none of the cruise ships have HEPA air filtration systems, such as are in use on newer airplanes, which with ultraviolet light can destroy many viruses and bacteria. As a result, air quality on these ships has been described as “20 times worse than in the busy city centres of some port cities” (Telegraph [London], 1 February 2017).



MS *Grand Princess* entering San Francisco Bay, March 9, with virus-infected passengers and crew members. Passengers were allowed to disembark, crew was held on board as disease spread. 40 days later the crew is still confined to the ship presently (April 22) off Ensenada, Mexico.

that would let it disembark. Four passengers died as it was waiting for permission to transit the Panama Canal; at least 1,400 symptom-free passengers were transferred to another cruise liner, the *Rotterdam*, which came out to bring supplies; and it took days of public pleas to get local and state authorities to allow the two ships to dock on April 2 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The horror story is not over. The 250 passengers and crew on the *Zaandam* with influenza-like symptoms were not allowed off, nor were any crew members, and the ship was sent back out to sea, as more and more on board fall ill. It's not alone. After the cruise industry announced on March 13 that it was suspending operations, more than 250,000 passengers disembarked from 120 ships. But according to “No Sail Order” by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as of April 9 there were still 50 cruise ships off the U.S. East Coast with 47,800 crew members, and 45 cruise ships off the Gulf and West Coasts with 32,000 crew on board.

The remaining passengers and

thousands of crew members are effectively imprisoned on the ghostly cruise ships circling off U.S. shores. Many have tested positive for the virus, but most have not even been tested. California's governor Gavin Newsom, Florida's governor Ron DeSantis and U.S. president Donald Trump are preventing the ships from docking. Clustered off Southern California there are 16 cruise liners, apparently awaiting chartered airplanes or vessels to take crews to their countries. By locking them on these ships the U.S. government, and Democratic and Republican politicians, are imposing a death sentence on many of these crew members.

We say: *Everyone on board must be allowed passage down the gangway to be tested for this deadly disease. Anyone testing positive should be treated at hospitals.* Those in the crew testing negative must be housed ashore and quarantined. Passengers can be housed, quarantined and flown home. *The crews should be paid at U.S. standards by the ship-owners while in U.S. waters. And all seamen have a right to be repatriated, which means waging a fight against the governments like that of India where the Hindu-chauvinist regime of Narendra Modi is preventing seafarers from going home.*

The Nightmare Odyssey of the *Grand Princess*

In early and mid-March national and international media highlighted the infected *Grand Princess* cruise ship, whose home port is San Francisco. She sailed to the Mexican Riviera on February 11 and returned to the Bay Area on February 21. During that trip three passengers contracted the coronavirus. As one passenger was being rushed by ambulance to the hospital, Princess Lines was encouraging passengers to stay on for the infected ship's next voyage to Hawaii, sailing that same day. Fifty to sixty did stay on, as some 2,500 new passengers boarded with a crew of over 1,100.

Longshore workers handled the ship's mooring lines, the luggage, garbage and stores (food and supplies) at Pier 27, the SF passenger ship terminal. Neither passengers, the crew nor the longshore workers were aware of the catastrophe that they were about to encounter. After visiting several of the Hawaiian Islands, the *Grand Princess* set sail February 29 for the Mexican Riviera. The crew and passengers were kept in the dark about infected passengers from the previous trip even after news media had announced on March 4 that the passenger from the previous trip had died of complications from the virus, the first death from it in California.

After that news broke, passengers were told to stay in their staterooms and that crew-to-passenger contact would be kept to a minimum. Cruise company officials cancelled the Mexico destination and ordered an abrupt course change heading for San Francisco. One crew member stated: “As I looked around the ship and realized this virus could have been spreading since 11th Feb, I became anxious. Nervous for passengers and crew who had no idea” (“The Diary of a *Grand Princess* Crew Member as the Coronavirus Spread on the Ship,” *New Yorker*, 17 March).

Governor Newsom ordered the ship to stay at sea outside the Golden Gate until all



Holland America cruise ship *Zaandam* (foreground) docking in Port Everglades, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, along with companion ship *Rotterdam* on April 2. *Zaandam* was then sent back out to sea with crew confined on board. Twenty days later they were still being held on board.



***Grand Princess* crew member cleans deck, March 5.**

passengers and crew could be tested for the coronavirus. Never happened. On March 5, an Air National Guard helicopter dropped only 46 test kits for the 3,700 people on board, 2,600 passengers and 1,100 crew. White House coronavirus task force chief and vice president Mike Pence announced on TV the next day that 19 crew and 2 passengers had tested positive. The deadly disease was going viral in the confined area of the *Grand Princess*. Passengers started calling their voyage the “Corona Cruise.”

Newsom did not allow the ship to dock at the usual San Francisco passenger ship terminals, and instead directed it to Berth 20 in the busy cargo port of Oakland across the Bay. Many noted that this was because Oakland is poorer and blacker than San Francisco. An unused and isolated terminal like Pier 96 in San Francisco could have been designated. When she finally docked in Oakland March 9, all of the ship’s passengers and some crew were disembarked and sent to Travis Air Force base and other military bases to be quarantined and voluntarily tested.

At Travis passengers were told by federal officials that if they were tested it would delay their going home. So only one-third of the 858 passengers agreed to be tested. An astounding 103 of the 283 tested were positive. Some testing positive were treated, however crew members testing positive and asymptomatic (showing no signs) were ordered back on the ship, contradicting the CDC’s statement that “persons with asymptomatic COVID-19 can spread the virus.”

Longshore and other port workers together with Filipino and Indian community activists gathered at the International Maritime Center in the Port of Oakland at a press conference on March 13 to raise a hue and cry over the confinement of the stranded crew on the virus-stricken *Grand Princess*. Maritime worker activist Jack Heyman, a retired member of International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10, emphasized: “You are building a petri dish by quarantining the crew on the ship. This is more than a problem, this is a crisis.” He added: “The rest of the crew needs to be tested, they need to be given medical treatment now.”

Robert Irminger of the Inland Boatman’s Union (IBU) noted that among the crew were 600 Filipinos as well as many Indians, Koreans, Sri Lankans and Italians. He emphasized that it was necessary to “to be able to repatriate them to their home countries.” ILWU Local 10 president Trent Willis and Local 34 vice president Ricky Cox slammed the safety conditions in the port, insisting that all equipment had to be cleaned. Longshore workers said they have never been trained in the safe handling of the virus-contam-



Demonstration of solidarity with *Grand Princess* crew, port of Oakland, March 13.

inated garbage being discharged off the ship, or handling of the passengers’ luggage. They have good reason for concern: two longshore workers had just died in the port in the last two months from industrial accidents.

Declaring solidarity with the trapped seamen, longshore workers successfully took job action to protect their safety and that of the community, insisting that the garbage be removed by a barge and taken to an incinerator. But Governor Newsom didn’t give a damn about the crew, ordering the ship with 641 workers still on board to anchor in the Bay. This was a catastrophe in the making, and on March 21, the ship’s second electronics officer, Restituto “Jun” Umabi Jr., was rushed ashore on a Coast Guard Med Evac boat. On April 3, “Jun” Umabi was the first crew member to die from complications of the COVID-19 infection.

Several passengers and crew members had died by then. Carnival Corporation, of which Beverly Hills-based Princess Cruises is a subsidiary, is still not being transparent on the number of passengers and crew infected, hospitalized and dead from complications of the coronavirus contracted on its ships. A group of passengers has sued Princess Cruises in federal court, charging that the company “chose to place profits over people, including the safety of their passengers, crew and the general public.” The lawsuit charges the company manifested “utter failure to provide even a modicum of care” (*San Jose Mercury*, 9 April).

Carnival-owned ships have effectively spread the virus around the world. On March 8, shortly before the World Health Organization declared a coronavirus pandemic, the *Ruby Princess* set sail from Sydney, Australia with 2,700 passengers and 1,100 crew members for a two-week cruise around New Zealand. But after it was hurriedly called back to port a week later, the disembarking passengers spread the virus around Australia. So far at least there have been 662 confirmed cases of COVID-19 from the *Ruby Princess* and 21 dead. But the crew of 1,000 is still confined on board, with 200 crew members showing flu-like symptoms.

This catastrophe is not limited to one mega corporation. Contaminated pas-

senger ships, oil tankers, container ships and Navy vessels are plying all oceans. Captain Brett Crozier of the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* was fired when his letter warning of the danger of the spread of the virus on the ship was made public. Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly was forced to resign for firing and attacking the captain after the crew responded on the deck of the ship with a massive, boisterous demonstration of support for the captain. One sailor has already died from the disease.

Love Boat Owners Fly “Flags of Convenience,” Pay Poverty Wages and No Taxes

The chairman of Miami-based Carnival Corporation, Micky Arison, owns 50% of the cruise ship industry, including Princess Cruises,² Holland America, P&O and Cunard, among others. Arison, an Israeli American billionaire, is one of the world’s richest men and a good friend and former business associate of Donald Trump.³ He has donated to both Republican and Democratic parties, which have allowed him to virtually escape paying U.S. taxes (*Forbes*, 16 February 2013). Even former senator Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), scion of one of America’s wealthiest dynasties, hypocritically decried Arison’s benefiting from the use of resources of some 40 federal agencies.

The \$2 trillion coronavirus crisis stimulus package did not include any money for the cruise ship companies, since they are not U.S. corporations. But Trump declared the industry a “prime candidate” for U.S. aid, and the White House tried to carve out an exception for it. Trump also announced that his pal Arison is willing to offer his ships as hospitals. Arison pulled this stunt before, offering his ships for relief worker housing after hurricanes for a “special price” of some \$300 million dollars. (Meanwhile, his ships *Carnival Breeze*, *Carnival Vista* and *Caribbean Fantasy* failed sanitation inspections by the U.S. Public Health Inspection division of the CDC.)

Just like the 2007-09 financial crisis, the “too big to fail” capitalists will get the lion’s share of government aid while workers get shafted. Meanwhile crew members are being effectively imprisoned, infected and dying on cruise ships.

The major cruise lines and their ships all have non-U.S. registries (Carnival in Panama, Royal Caribbean in Liberia, Norwegian in Bermuda). This is typical for the

² Its *Pacific Princess* cruise liner was featured in the television series, *The Love Boat*.

³ Carnival helped sponsor Trump’s “reality TV show” *The Apprentice* for a number of years.

entire shipping industry. Today most of the world’s trade is carried on such “flag of convenience” bottoms, using highly exploited workers from poor semi-colonial countries. The capitalist media may once in a while decry scofflaws who hide offshore to avoid paying taxes or violating environmental laws, but you won’t see exposés of owners using “flags of convenience” to bust unions or escape from unions which seek to provide seamen with good wages, safe working conditions and benefits.

This practice goes back to the post-World War II Marshall Plan, a linchpin of the anti-Soviet Cold War, which opened the floodgate for American capitalists to change their flags and ship registry to countries like Greece. Maritime unions didn’t wage an international organizing drive then because they were in the midst of a “red purge,” mainly in the CIO unions, while the AFL played a key role in busting communist-led unions in Europe. This was engineered by operatives like ex-CPer Jay Lovestone who became a virulent anti-communist and U.S. spy (first OSS, then CIA) Irving Brown. Meanwhile, flag-waving labor bureaucrats helped set U.S. workers against those of other nations, pushing “Buy American” chauvinism.

Currently, the cruise corporations say that many of their ships have “contracts” with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF). But these are not union contracts negotiated and voted by the seafarers. They are low-wage, substandard contracts set by the United Nations’ International Labor Organization (ILO), a tripartite body composed of employers, labor and governments – decidedly not a workers organization. The ITF, based in London, has acted like a company union, misusing the muscle of dockworkers and maritime unions to get sweetheart contracts with shipowners.

An inspiring four-year dockers struggle in Liverpool, England, lasting from 1995 to 1999, rekindled a flame of international labor solidarity, including in the United States.⁴ But the class-collaborationist ITF refused to support the Liverpool dockers because they violated Margaret Thatcher’s anti-union laws, enforced later by “New Labour” prime minister Tony Blair. The most militant unions in that struggle, which ended in defeat, went on to organize the International Dockworkers Council (IDC), which recently issued a solidarity statement for the crew of the *Grand Princess*.

The ITF, which has a contract with the *Grand Princess* through an Italian maritime union, has called for the crew to be repatriated. Yet at the same time it extended their contracts, increasing the maximum tour of service, as seafarers desperately want to get off and go home. The ITF also covered for Princess Lines by claiming that there was only “speculation that some passengers and crew had tested positive for COVID-19” when it was refused permission to dock in San Francisco (*Seafarers*, 19 March). Yet by March 5, TV reports said that 21 on board had tested positive.

Absurdly, the ITF is calling on governments of “flag of convenience” (FOC)

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⁴ In 1997 ILWU members and labor activists in the SF Bay Area picketed the scab ship *Neptune Jade* carrying cargo from the union-busting Mersey Dock and Harbor Company. See “ILWU: Defense Victory in Neptune Jade Picket Case,” *The Internationalist* No. 7, April-May 1999.



Kitchen crew members on the *Grand Princess*.

CSWP Calls for Workers Action in Coronavirus Crisis

Our brothers and sisters in Class Struggle Workers - Portland issued this call for action by the unions and workers organizations on March 18:

In the current coronavirus/economic crisis, working people – and particularly those who live paycheck to paycheck – are being pushed into unbearable situations. Many are forced to make agonizing decisions when it comes to going to work, often with inadequate safety and labor conditions. Those who are thrown out of work are left to fend for themselves. Those least able to protect themselves face financial ruin burdened with medical bills beyond their means.

In this crisis, Class Struggle Workers Portland calls on unions and all workers to demand the following in the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis:

- All workers who are unable to work as a result of the virus – including any who feel that their continued presence on the job puts their health at risk – shall be paid in full for all time missed until they are able to return to work, with no penalty or disciplinary action from their employer.
- All workers who continue to work shall be furnished with all Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) necessary, as determined by the workers themselves. All workplaces shall adopt immediate safety measures including frequent sanitizing practices, handwashing facilities, and physical separation as much as is required to protect them.
- Unions must vigorously defend the health and safety of their members and others, including in categories that have been ruled essential services. Utilities workers unions should announce that they refuse to cut off services due to non-payment for the duration of the crisis.
- All testing and medical treatment should be free and available on demand.

The current Portland Sick Leave law only allows employees to accrue 40 hours of paid leave per year. As many businesses have been ordered to close for at least four weeks in Oregon, the situation for those workers is dire. Without immediate assistance, they not only may lose their housing, but also their health insurance. There should be *unlimited sick pay at the highest level*. The same should apply to those who need to care for family members.

Labor must demand that working people must not be sacrificed as businesses and services are shuttered. All are affected. Portland schools closed, teachers will continue to be paid, but the classified staff will not. We protest this outrage, and demand that all staff be paid.

In Seattle, Teamsters are calling for all Uber and Lyft drivers to receive \$1,000 a week in compensation for lost work. This should be a demand on employers and governments across the country. The CSWP says, rather than vague calls for relief, unions must immediately begin organizing to demand full pay for all workers who have lost time as a result of the virus.

Unions should also take the lead in forming *health and safety committees*, to be elected at every workplace, both union and unrepresented, to ensure that all safety measures are being enforced for all workers, and that all necessary equipment is available. Unions should make every effort to ensure that unrepresented workers also have access to every protection. No work should be performed until these basic safety practices are in place.

Schools closing has put a tremendous strain on working and low-income families, and women in particular, as someone must care for the kids. Workers organizations must demand *free, high-quality child care facilities for all who need them*, including organized educational services.

The fact that everyone must have a home is even more obvious and urgent during a pandemic. A militant workers movement would work with tenants and homeless organizations to *stop evictions, take over unoccupied apartments, investment properties and second homes of the wealthy* and occupy hotel space to provide *housing for the homeless* instead of the huge profits of speculators and price-gougers.

Many of the most vulnerable in this crisis are immigrants, who face not only loss of income, lack of medical care and their children being deprived of school, but the ever-present threat of deportation. Now in California, New York and elsewhere, I.C.E. is taking advantage of the coronavirus lockdown to make more raids and arrests. Unions must demand: *Stop the raids and deportations! Shut down the immigrant detention centers (concentration camps) – Free the detainees to return to their families and communities! I.C.E. out of Portland!*

The ruling parties are exploiting this crisis, with the Democrats whipping up hysteria on one hand, in a cynical attempt to score points in an election year, while Trump tweets out an image of himself fiddling as Rome burns, exploits the crisis to push fear of “foreigners” and hands out \$1.5 trillion in free money to Wall Street.

A mass, militant workers movement with a class-struggle leadership would establish *workers commissions* at workplaces to decide appropriate measures, including shutting down where necessary, with no loss in pay, or continuing production with needed safeguards.

Ultimately, it will take a planned economy capable of redirecting production and distribution of medical equipment, safety equipment and basic necessities for a large-scale outbreak, with workplaces organized with the safety of workers as a central priority, in order to effectively fight a pandemic. That means a fight to end this capitalist system of profit-driven chaos, incompetence, racism and exploitation, and establish a workers government.

With the lives and livelihoods of so many workers and oppressed people in the balance, the only way forward is class struggle. ■



Class Struggle Workers – Portland with Internationalist Group and other trade-unionists at February 2 anti-Klan protest.



New York City, epicenter of real estate speculation. Construction workers complained that sanitary conditions were terrible and there was no need to keep them on the job. An upstate electrician remarked, “I’m essential to the pocketbooks of rich contractors and essential for spreading the virus, but that’s about it.” After protests, the essential industry designation was removed in NYC.

Chelmsford, Massachusetts UPS Workers: No Safety, No Work!

As workers in many locations and industries across the U.S. carry out job actions, walkouts and protests against employers' brutal indifference to elementary health and safety during the coronavirus crisis, we reproduce below a flier by Mike Gath, an activist in Teamsters Local 25 who has worked at the UPS facility in Chelmsford, Massachusetts for over a decade. While management plays company videos boasting about making lots of money during the crisis, the bosses at the round-the clock facility did not inform the 1,500 workers about COVID-19 cases there. Nor did they provide any forms of protection for the workers, or follow the safety guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). On March 25, Local 25 President Sean O'Brien issued a letter to the company (referred to in Brother Gath's flier below); he followed up with another letter on March 30 noting that "the Company continues in its failure to keep its employees safe." These issues intersect key points in the statement by Class Struggle Workers – Portland, "CSWP Calls For Workers Action in Coronavirus Crisis."

No Safety, No Work!

To fellow UPS workers at Chelmsford

Yesterday (Friday, March 27) we learned that a full-time Chelmsford Hub worker has tested positive for the coronavirus, and that 11 others have been quarantined as "presumptive" cases. Absolutely nothing was being done by the company to provide gloves, hand sanitizer or any other protective measures, "social distancing" or any such thing. Meanwhile the company was playing videos about how much money it's making and how great things supposedly are (for them).

Did the company tell us about what was happening with coronavirus at our workplace? No. We learned about it because the president of our union local wrote a letter to them accurately pointing out that "the Company has made zero efforts to protect its employees." The letter demanded that the company provide gloves, Purell etc. and follow the official CDC guidelines. I made copies of Broth-

er O'Brien's letter and handed them out Friday night on the midnight shift.

Then, "magically," at the start of the pre-load shift, gloves, hand sanitizer and some paper towels for wiping surfaces appeared, and supervisors offered them to people. Where were these supplies up to that point? Why weren't any of them given out until then? We know that all the company cares about is \$\$\$, but this is ridiculous.

So now that they got the whistle blown on them, UPS handed out some gloves etc. Is this enough? Absolutely not. We demand:

- The entire facility has to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected by the beginning of work on Monday.

- Otherwise no work on Monday.

- This must be done by an independent company specialized in that kind of work. UPS workers are not trained to do this. And the whole facility must be thoroughly cleaned each day in the midst of this coronavirus crisis.

- Gloves and other protective gear for everyone. A sanitizer dispenser at every bay.

The company must follow and train people on CDC guidelines.

- 1 person per truck. Obviously this is needed under CDC guidelines in this crisis and it's up to us to enforce it.

We need an independent, all-worker health & safety committee of union stewards and other Chelmsford workers. That committee must ensure compliance by the company. As they have amply shown, we cannot trust them one bit.

No safety, no work. If there is no thorough, independent cleaning and disinfection of the facility by Monday, work there should not proceed until it is done.

Union power, workers power – this is a matter of life and death for us all right now.

Mike Gath

March 28, 2020



Chelmsford, Massachusetts UPS facility where Teamster union officials and workers are protesting unsafe working conditions.

Is the company waiting 'til someone dies before it thoroughly cleans & disinfects the Chelmsford UPS hub?

Now there are SIX confirmed cases here. Like we said a week ago: NO SAFETY, NO WORK!

Last night we were told that two more of our co-workers have been confirmed as testing "positive" for having the coronavirus. And as of a week ago there were 11 "presumptive" cases. What is the number up to now? And what else are we not being told?

Meanwhile the building has STILL not been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected! Flimsy gloves that tear quickly, some squirts of some kind of liquid, and so forth – it's just for show. And even these token "measures" only happened after the union denounced the company's total indifference. As I wrote last week, the company didn't tell us anything about what was going on with the coronavirus in our workplace until the union blew the whistle. What more is UPS hiding today?

Our job is classed as an "essential function." As for us, the workers who actually do the job, apparently "essential" = "expendable." We already knew the company sees us that way. But it's a real kick in the gut, in the midst of this crisis, to experience this: that apparently they'd rather see workers die than interrupt the flow of profits. After all, "Business is booming," they say. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, last year UPS raked in almost \$74 billion in total revenue and over \$4 billion in net income. Last month, it announced the annual base salary of its new CEO: \$1,250,000 (that's \$104,167 per month).

Meanwhile, for us it's "Your scans are low" – "Bring your PPH up" – "Use the methods" and the rest of it, as they push our work in drastically unsafe conditions to keep pumping out their profits.

Speaking for myself, I make \$17.59 an hour after 10 years at UPS. Some brothers and sisters make less, others

more. The company clearly views us all as expendable, and thinks our lives come cheap – but they aren't for us, or for our families. Now in many places and industries around the country – even Amazon – workers are taking action, saying we refuse to die for the bosses' profits. It's starting to wake many people up to the fact that without the labor of us, the working class, nothing moves. That means we have power. It's high time to use it.

SO ONCE AGAIN:– The entire Chelmsford facility must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. Otherwise no work on Monday. This must be done by an independent company specialized in that kind of work, which UPS workers and regular cleaning staff are not trained to do. All necessary and adequate protective gear must be provided. UPS must follow and train people on CDC guidelines.

– We need an independent, all-worker health & safety committee of union stewards and other Chelmsford workers. That committee must ensure compliance by the company. As the company keeps on showing, we cannot trust them one bit. Sisters and brothers off work in this crisis must get full pay. And you know what? We should be getting hazard pay, which should be double-time.

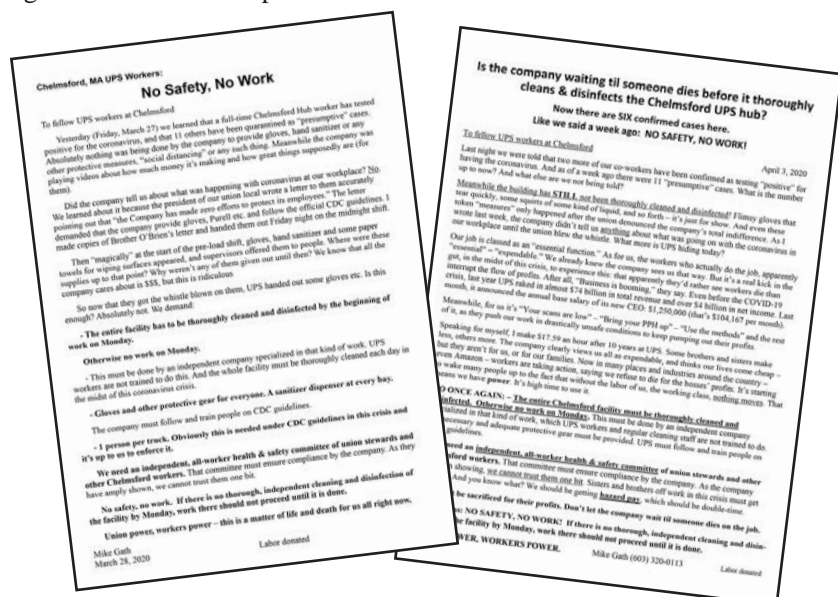
We won't be sacrificed for their profits. Don't let the company wait 'til someone dies on the job.

That means: NO SAFETY, NO WORK! If there is no thorough, independent cleaning and disinfection of the facility by Monday, work there should not proceed until it is done.

UNION POWER, WORKERS POWER

Mike Gath

April 3, 2020



L.A. Transit Workers Facing Deadly Conditions – It's Up to Us to Fight for Health & Safety Now!

The following leaflet was issued by Joseph Wagner, a member of ATU Local 1277 in Los Angeles, on April 13.

In this deadly COVID-19 pandemic, transit workers here and around the country are increasingly getting exposed and dying at an alarming rate. In New York, over 60 transit workers have already died from COVID-19. Having worked for MTA here in Los Angeles for 14 years (I'm a traction power inspector and an active member of ATU Local 1277), I see the huge contradiction, as do many other brothers and sisters. We see the contradiction between what we do and how we, and the rest of the working class, are treated – especially those on the “front lines” of facing the virus pandemic.

Management and the “city fathers” class us as essential workers (which we are), while seeing us, and all workers, as disposable. Our bosses really don't give a damn about our most basic health and safety. It's high time that we use our power to demand adequate health and safety measures, as part of defending all the working class and oppressed people in the midst of this crisis.

We can't rely on the capitalist government and politicians to come to the aid of working people, who are feeling it on all sides. It's not just New York. In Chicago and now Los Angeles, transit workers and the general public we serve continue to be infected and the death toll keeps rising. Meanwhile, unemployment has hit the roof, with jobless claims at all-time highs.

Transit workers provide an essential



A driver of the L.A. Metropolitan Transit Authority, March 22. The MTA outrageously placed bus drivers, some of the most exposed workers, far down the list for “prioritized” distribution of personal protective equipment.

service, since we get working people to and from their jobs and around town. Increasingly we make L.A. run, as the gridlock gets worse each year. Bus and train operators, together with mechanics and maintenance personnel, storeroom and janitorial staff, make L.A. move. In the latest internal memo from the MTA, the bosses admit that (given mismanagement of just about everything, due to the rule of the profit motive in this society) they are in short supply of the necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for us to perform our jobs safely. We need the bosses like we need a hole in the head.

An example of how outrageous things are is that bus drivers, who are among the very most exposed sectors of our union sisters and brothers, are listed fourth (out of six categories) on management's “priority list for PPE distribution”!

*** In this deadly crisis and moving forward, we need to elect UNION SAFETY COMMITTEES at every division made up of workers from ATU, SMART (UTU's successor) and TCU, to enforce safe work conditions. It's our lives that are at stake, after all.

*** These committees should demand the PPE, cleaning supplies and procedures

deemed necessary by the workers themselves to provide safe transit service to the public. How to ensure compliance? By using the workers' power. And in the present crisis, overcoming the bosses' divide-and-conquer tactics is more important than ever. The three workers unions, and the different job titles they represent, need to come together to back these committees, with the power to shut down unsafe working conditions.

Right now, each individual bus operator is put on the spot in a way that pits “social distancing” against getting the “taps” for fares. That means risking their job or risking their health. Instead, and in order to make common cause with the ridership through the MTA system:

*** We need to demand FREE PUBLIC TRANSIT! Expand the frequency and hours of service. Take out the turnstiles. Cops and I.C.E. agents out of the transit system and off the platforms.

*** In the increasingly expensive and gentrifying L.A. county, during the stay-at-home order we must demand a moratorium on rent and mortgage payments for working people, and support housing for the homeless and poor.

*** All part-time bus operators must be made full-time, with full benefits and sick pay! When transit workers get infected or need to take care of sick family, we must demand full unlimited sick pay!

UNION POWER, WORKERS POWER!
It's a matter of life and death!

War Moves...

continued from page 3

the tit-for-tat tariff war has mainly hurt capitalist industries, while the direct effects of it on China's economy are limited. Beijing has stopped buying U.S. farm products altogether, instead massively importing soybeans and other products from Argentina and Brazil. But the limited trade war started by Trump could pave the way to a full-blown military and economic attack on China. Kevin Rudd, the former prime minister of Australia, asked, “Could Trade War Turn Into the Real Thing?” (*Bloomberg Opinion*, 20 August 2018).

While Trump has been on-again, off-again in his “transactional” relationship with Xi and the Beijing regime, the Democrats have positioned themselves as the consistently hardline Cold Warriors against China (and North Korea). When the White House announced a temporary truce with a limited trade accord in January, “The deal came under fire from top Democrats, including Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, who criticized the agreement for failing to address China's state-owned enterprises and industrial subsidies” (*New York Times*, 16 January).

On the military front, Obama's former vice president Biden made repeated sabre-rattling threats against China during the debates of Democratic presidential candidates:

- To force North Korea to give up its nuclear deterrent, “the way we do that is, we make clear to China ... we're going to move up our defenses, we're going to continue to make sure we increase our re-

lationship with South Korea, and if they view that as a threat, it's an easy thing to respond to.” (20 November 2019)

- “What we started in our administration that Trump stopped, we should be moving 60 percent of our sea power to that area of the world to let, in fact, the Chinese understand that they're not going to go any further.... We, in fact, need to have allies who understand that we're going to stop the Chinese from their actions.... We have to make it clear, this is as far as you go, China.” (19 December 2019)

- “I would make it clear to China. We are going to continue to move closer to make sure that we can in fact prevent China, prevent North Korea, from launching missiles, to take them down.” (25 February 2020)

Against the bipartisan imperialist warmongers, it is the duty of all class-conscious workers and opponents of imperialism to stand with China, North Korea and the other remaining deformed workers states, and uphold their right to nuclear and any other kind of weapons (and means to deliver them) to deter and defend against the very real threat of imperialist attack.

In the U.S. today, there is wall-to-wall China-bashing. Trump whips up racism referring to the “Chinese virus,” Democrats and Republicans compete with each other in the election labeling their opponents “soft on China,” the union bureaucracy lambastes China for “stealing American jobs” and the bourgeois media spews out a torrent of lies deriding China's successes in containing the coronavirus. Bernie Sanders, the supposed

“democratic socialist” who is now rounding up votes for Biden, declared: “we must work with the international community to deter foreign support for China's military buildup.” Meanwhile, most of the left parrots imperialist lies, calling China capitalist – even imperialist – and refusing to defend it against the real imperialists.

For Genuine Communist Leadership – Smash Imperialism and Counterrevolution!

The U.S. imperialists have long recognized the crucial strategic importance of the South China Sea, through which roughly one third of global shipping flows. Their strategic goal has been to strangle and isolate China economically, working aggressively together with Japanese imperialism in joint maneuvers off North Korea and in the South China Sea (while keeping Japan's oil supplies under control). Right-wing “China hawk” Steve Bannon declared in 2017, “We're going to war in the South China Sea in 5 to 10 years ... there's no doubt about that.” But the same “war with China is inevitable” message is trumpeted by mainstream journalists like Richard Bernstein and Russ H. Munro in their book, *The Coming Conflict with China* (Vintage Books, 1997).

Yet the Beijing Stalinists seek in vain to maintain “harmonious” relations with Washington and with capitalist rulers around the world. An illusory “peaceful coexistence with imperialism” has always been the corollary of the Stalinists' anti-

Marxist dogma of “building socialism in one country.” The illusion that “peace” can be attained within the limits defined by the imperialist “world order” is the road to defeat for the working class and the crucial gains remaining from the 1949 Chinese Revolution. The imperialist rulers are determined to “take back China” (just as their assets want to “take back Hong Kong”), and have been ever since that revolution drove out Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, because the very existence of a Chinese workers state, even bureaucratically deformed, is a threat to their world domination.

The parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy threatens the collectivized economy, which – despite huge capitalist inroads – remains the basis of the Chinese workers state. Trotskyists fight for genuine communist leadership, to oust this petty-bourgeois layer with its nationalist policies through a political revolution that establishes the proletarian democracy of workers councils (soviets) on an internationalist program. The capitalists – imperialist, Taiwanese or domestic – dream of once again being able to exploit the masses of Chinese workers “freely” (that is, enslaving them and subjugating China) by restoring private property relations. Revolutionaries fighting for a communist world look to the power of the international working class to stop them.

The League for the Fourth International says: *Workers worldwide must take a stand for the defeat of the U.S. imperialist drive for counterrevolution in China! All U.S. warships, bases and troops out of Asia now!* ■

Corona Capitalism...

continued from page 1

gram began decades ago. Many of those jobs are gone for good, as small companies will go out of business in droves. On the other hand, many workers (particularly in distribution) are kept on the job without adequate personal protection equipment. Meanwhile, the vast bulk of the \$2 trillion in “rescue” funds will go to prop up giant corporations like Boeing, while workers get a few crumbs in jobless pay – and millions of immigrants get nothing but stepped-up threats and repression. Where in the centrally planned Chinese economy the shutdown can be temporary, under capitalism the devastation will be vastly greater.

In these catastrophic conditions, communists insist that the class struggle continues, and the need for revolutionary leadership is even more acute. We print below the presentation, abridged and edited for publication, of comrade Abram Negrete to a teleconference meeting of the Marxist Study Group in New York on March 19.

One can approach the coronavirus crisis with a lot of attention to the financial and economic aspects, to the medical/epidemiological aspects, to the barbarous insanity and absurdity of bourgeois politics, and many others angles. But I want, first, to lay out some ideas that I think for most of us are not new, but which have a particular urgency and a particular relevance right now because of all the extremely powerful and crucial ways in which the current situation reveals the barbarity of the capitalist society that we live in.

I feel that the best way I could begin this talk is with a recent letter from a Cuban scientist who is part of an institute which is on the cutting edge in the world of medical science. His brother, who is part of the same institute, was closely involved in the neuropathy epidemic, in the early 1990s, which came to be called the “Cuban Optical Neuropathy Epidemic.” This was a sudden onset of mysterious blindness. The Cubans cured it through an extraordinary combination of medical science and the advantages of a planned economy. As he writes, “the basic principles applied then were universal healthcare and widespread screening and intervention, and not cost.

“This is the philosophy behind the current preparations for the pandemic based on the family doctor and our health system,” which is a system they have in Cuba, it’s a little different than the system we have in a profit-ridden capitalist country like the U.S., obviously. “In spite of having only eleven cases to date,” he writes, “our country is preparing. Cuban doctors are helping other countries, as is our internationalist duty. And you probably know of the British ship with patients – denied entry into many territories – that were accepted in Cuba yesterday, in an elementary expression of human solidarity to aid them to go home to the UK.”

He quotes [Cuban independence leader] Jose Martí saying that our fatherland is humanity, and then goes on: “Many of my friends are all engaged in research regarding coronavirus. They are testing Interferon, and other drugs. Cuba is helping other countries to gain access to Interferon. In fact, we are producing Interferon Alpha-2B.” This is a medicine which has been shown to be rather effective in treating symptoms of coronaviruses, including COVID-19. He continues:

“In fact, Interferon Alpha-2B [is being produced] in a joint factory in Beijing and it was one of the drugs being used in China



The face of barbarism. Refrigerated container at Elmhurst Hospital on March 25 serves as temporary morgue as huge numbers die in coronavirus pandemic. 13 died that day at Elmhurst. The capitalist medical system and bourgeois politicians cannot provide for medical needs of the population, particularly (but not only) the poor and oppressed.

for treatment. Cuban scientists are also currently working on a vaccine, but that may take more time. Regarding China, I left China [where he conducts research] a few days before the epidemic became widespread, since it was the time to work in Cuba. I have remained in touch with my lab in China. We’re organizing work remotely until the situation becomes better. I find the Chinese actions admirable and heroic. My Chinese assistant’s husband is a doctor who left for another region to work there due to the epidemic.

“The response of China and Cuba shows that a public health system with universal coverage is the only hope for humanity. Capitalism is not a humane society and not only does it propagate war and suffering to profit a few, but it does not even provide basic protection from disease for the majority of people. The poor and underserved are the ones that will surely bear the brunt of this pandemic. In spite of this, as usual, criticism of China in this crisis and now of Cuba is prevalent. As a Marxist, I understand that the world view is always determined by class, no matter what reality is. This is the basis of the failure of many governments to deal with the current crisis.”

That’s not an official statement; it’s from a scientist, and needless to say his political outlook is not the same as ours. We have our own views and positions. But it is inconceivable that a bourgeois government could set up an institute or produce a scientist who is representing the efforts of that country who could write a letter like this. The campaign of hatred and propaganda and demonization against Cuba and China right now indicates the need for the unconditional military defense of those countries. I also think that he expressed some of the fundamental points, in his own way and his own terms, that, thinking critically, we need to express to young people today.

I also want to draw attention to the statement which was published late last night from Class Struggle Workers – Portland. It is a group of trade-unionists, of workers, in the Painters Union, in IATSE, which is the stagehands union, the Iron Workers, and other unions who fraternally work with the Internationalist Group – which represents revolutionary Trotskyism as the U.S. section of the League for the Fourth International – and who have been at the forefront of organizing things like “Hard Hats for Gay Rights,” “Portland Labor Against the Fascists,” and many other things. They got the Painters Union, Local 10, in their city to pass a motion around the last election call-

ing for the labor movement to break from the Democratic Party and forge a class-struggle workers party.

In this crisis, where workers are being exposed to very dangerous conditions, exposed to losing their livelihood, exposed to union-busting threats – for example, in Minnesota, the governor has said he will “put aside” collective bargaining agreements, in other words, union contracts – these comrades in Portland have come out with a very important statement “For Workers Action in the Coronavirus Crisis.” In that statement they put forward very specific, concrete, class-struggle demands for the working class, for the defense of immigrants, for the I.C.E. immigration cops to be driven out of Portland, for using the power of the working class to stop the raids and deportations, for fighting for free high-quality childcare facilities for all who need them, which is urgent right now, and many other demands.

When there’s a crisis – particularly an unexpected (at least for most crises), a terrible and frightening crisis – it’s like an x-ray or like a lightening flash which shows the reality that people don’t always see. The reality that is often behind the screen or lurking in the social relations which are there every day and accepted as “just the way things are,” but which have burst out all of a sudden. That shows the nature of this society, the structure and the contradictions of this capitalist society. Suddenly, in a second, it seems like nothing is the way it was before. So we’re sitting here in our homes, talking to each other through this digital means, but millions of people are sitting at home, or are out working, or are trying to scrounge up some food or figure out where they are going to get day-

care for their children feeling like nothing is the same as before.

When you have a crisis of that scope, it illuminates key aspects of how things really are and have actually been in many ways under the previous surface appearance of “normality.” So, if we think back, a lot of the young people in and around our organization were first drawn into politics at the time of the mass protests against racist police murders of black people in this society. Obviously, for black people in this society, it was not new and it was not “news” and it was no surprise of any kind to find out – because they had known all along that just being black in this racist society could be a death sentence, pretty much at any moment.

But then there was a series of highly publicized and, now, videoed barbaric and horrific murders of black people that led to the Black Lives Matter mass protests. Young people, many of whom had never thought about politics, had their faces smashed into the reality that they live in a barbaric society. That they live in a society in which the lives of black people could be snuffed out in a second with complete impunity on the street, or in their homes, or for “driving while black,” or swimming while black, or standing outside a store, or just existing while black. It brought home some of the realities of this country going back to the [Supreme Court’s 1857] Dred Scott case that said black people had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” It goes back to the days of slavery that, along with genocide against Native American peoples, was the foundation of capitalism in this country.

It was another huge, horrific shock for large numbers of young people in this society just recently when they began to see highly publicized photographs of children locked into cages and children being locked down in “hieleras,” or “I.C.E. boxes,” as a form of sensory deprivation and essentially torture, punishment and terrorization at the border. That, too, is not something new – it did not start with Trump, it was going on under Obama. But it brought many young people face to face with the reality of the cruelty and sadism, actually, of the society that they live in, and the need to figure that out. Of course, the Democratic Party sought to mobilize and weaponize that hypocritically, in the most cynical way, to bring votes to the party of “Deporter-in-Chief” Obama, but it brought home to people those realities of the cruelty of this society.

I think we will need to use some of these examples educationally when we talk to people in the coming period, because we are going to be teaching the ABCs of Marxism to



Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times* (1936), symbolizing the enslavement of living labor to dead labor, crystalized in the form of capital.



Visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on March 6, President Donald Trump declared his uncle “a great super-genius,” and opined that he personally may “have a natural ability” as a medical scientist.

a whole bunch of people, if we do our work right. Some people were politicized before, during the great financial crisis that exploded in 2007-08, when the speculative financial bubble of fictitious capital burst, and also the bubble of the illusion of supposed “prosperity and stability” burst. Millions were thrown out of their jobs and their homes, and people suddenly learned things that they never knew were even there. Like “collateralized debt obligations,” some weird, esoteric financial instrument, supposedly this monster creature that had emerged from some subterranean hellhole and thrown them out of their houses, because it had become an instrument of speculation and you could bundle debt and sell it and resell it.

We saw it also with Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This was not a biological catastrophe, it was a meteorological catastrophe, but it was above all a social catastrophe in which class and race immediately took the foreground in the question of who would get food, who would get rescued by a helicopter, who would live and who would die.

Then, of course, we saw it with the Haiti earthquake (which, among other things, as we know, very starkly displayed the complete bankruptcy of the Spartacist League, the organization which used to be the standard-bearer of Trotskyism in the U.S.). And then again with Hurricane Maria hitting Puerto Rico in 2017, when Trump tossed out paper towels and the capitalist PROMESA junta, of investor dictators, literally, seized the opportunity to further tighten the colonialist stranglehold on Puerto Rico. There are so many other examples that I want to incite people to think about, ways in which to use these examples to communicate some of our basic ideas. One of the very big ones was the AIDS crisis, and the ways in which bigotry and hatred were used for a policy of malign neglect by the Reagan administration which essentially was perfectly happy for people to die off from AIDS.

Or take World War I, where European societies, or so-called “Western civilization,” had become inured to what was underlying it: exploitation and colonialism, exemplified by the horrors of the Belgian Congo. Every year it seemed there were more opera houses, schools, newspapers; more science, more progress. Then all of a sudden, on 4 August 1914, all of the advances of chemistry, physics, mechanics and aviation turned into means to convert millions of human beings – or millions of human beings turned each other – into piles of corpses.

This was followed, not too long thereafter, eleven years after World War I, by the Great Depression, which produced a whole generation of young radicals. It made millions of radicals as they saw that “too much” production meant “too little” food or even places to live for the people that worked in those factories, or the people that grew the food or harvested it. They saw the newsreels of milk being poured down the gutters and of meat being thrown into ditches or burned and of millions being thrown out of work and millions starving. Then a new war came.

Now I want to shift gears a bit. You may know that the Trump administration, not all that long ago, banned the use – in some government publications involved with epidemiology and so forth – of a terrible term: “science-based.” Another banned term was “evidence-based.” After the coronavirus crisis really broke out – when it was apparent that despite the effectiveness of the Chinese efforts (notwithstanding initial screw-ups by the Stalinist bureaucracy of the deformed workers state), the virus was spreading and reaching the U.S. – Trump went to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. At the CDC he gave one of his typical speeches, which in a tragicomic and surreal way exemplifies a lot of things that we all know about the time that we live in.

Trump said, “My uncle, Dr. John Trump, was a great person, he was a great super-genius.” Then he says, talking about the coronavirus: “I like this stuff, I really get it! People are surprised that I understand it. Every one of these doctors said, ‘How do you know so much about this?’ Maybe I have a natural ability. Maybe I should’ve done that instead of running for president.” But I guess we can all breathe easy because instead of the super-stable-genius Trump running the U.S. government’s efforts against the coronavirus, we have the zombie Jesus lunatic, Mike Pence, who believes that humans and dinosaurs co-existed when the Earth was created supposedly 6 thousand years ago. So he’s obviously just the man to run a scientific effort against a terribly dangerous pandemic.

Young people who are questioning the society that they live in need to study that society, to learn what is underlying the situation, and they need to act. One of the things that Marxists need to explain is that those two things go together, that there can be no effective action without a real understanding of the society, and that Marxism provides that understanding. At the same time, crucially,

Marxism is a guide to action.

The current crisis very dramatically shows the massive inequality in this society, where essential things are not available at all. I think we can start by explaining the anarchy of production. So there are not enough ventilators. If people get really sick with coronavirus, the sickest of them frequently need those devices to help them breathe. Also, there are not enough masks for medical personnel, etc. One of our comrades works in a group home where they’re worried that they’re not even going to have enough Lysol disinfectant. They don’t have the basic materials that they need even to take care of terribly sick people.

There are not enough hospital beds. There’s not enough of all sorts of things that are absolutely crucial in many cases now, and it will be even more so in cases of life and death. Or take the mundane case of toilet paper. Recently, there was an article in the New York Times (13 March), “Is There Really a Toilet Paper Shortage?” This article talks about the toilet paper-producing companies being worried about a crisis of overproduction. So this is an opportunity to explain to people the fundamental Marxist understanding that living labor is enslaved to dead labor, in other words to human labor crystalized in the form of capital.

The point is that production in this society is not for use, it’s not to produce medicine, it’s not to produce hospital beds, it’s not to produce hospitals, it’s not to produce ventilators that we so desperately need right now. That is not what it is for. Medicine is not to cure people. Milk is not for babies. It’s not for the use-value, it’s for the exchange-value and how it can be transformed into surplus value, to make profits. So that basic point, which can seem so abstract to people in normal times, becomes highly concrete right now and is at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. We explain that this is the dictatorship of, in the first place the profit motive, and in the second place it’s the dictatorship of capital and it is the social dictatorship of the capitalist class, of the bourgeoisie.

No reformist tinkering can undo that. No schemes of taxing a little bit more, or having a New Deal of whatever hue, named after the signature program of the imperialist Democrat FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], is going to amount to a hill of beans in a major crisis like this. None of the schemes that Bernie Sanders or AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] or their enthusiasts put forward can even begin to address this. What’s more, they stand counterposed to addressing it because they actually uphold – and they say this quite openly and honestly – the fundamental system of the dictatorship of profit. They don’t call it that, but Bernie Sanders says very explicitly that he is not for the expropriation of the means of production. They reject the very notion of taking the means of production out of the hands of the owning class and having them seized by the working class.

At the same time, right now, ever larger sections of workers stand to lose their jobs. There’s a comrade who works in a restaurant chain who told us earlier today that 60% of the workers at his workplace have been laid off and it looks like the whole chain could close. These are food workers and they’re mainly immigrants. On the street, coming back from the store yesterday, I saw immigrant workers everywhere here in New York City, the heart of finance capital. There’s no protection of any kind for our class sisters and brothers. These are the delivery guys, you know, on their bikes taking food to

people who are sheltering in place, so many young and not so young delivery guys taking food to more affluent people. The Caribbean nannies and the South Asian and East Asian nannies pushing white babies in strollers. The Mexican and Ecuadorian workers together with Irish and Irish-American workers playing St. Patrick’s Day music loudly at the work sites. Then there were the fruit stand sellers from Afghanistan and Egypt, and the Chinese and Mexican laundromat workers, and the women who clean houses, like some of our comrades and the mothers of some of our comrades.

That sector of the working class is the most vulnerable right now. Their income, like that of many workers, is being slashed or taken away. There’s nobody to watch their kids or push their kids in strollers or go out and buy food for them. The Democratic Party is sure not going to protect them. They don’t have the right to vote. Many times, they don’t have papers. Meanwhile, the bourgeois government is exploiting the coronavirus crisis and the lockdowns to carry out I.C.E. raids and arrests in California and New Rochelle, while asylum seekers at the border are being sealed off ever more brutally. Our program for workers action is an urgent question of life and death right now. And the people who are in detention centers, those concentration camps, when some of them get coronavirus, the conditions are going to be horrifically dangerous. They already are horrifically dangerous. They must be freed and those camps shut down. Again, I would refer comrades and friends to the CSWP statement.

So the bourgeoisie and its agencies are most definitely pouncing on the chance to ramp up repression right now. Surveillance is multiplying. Just today I read that Israel is gathering cell phone data to track the social networks of people with coronavirus. They claim this is just for medical reasons. Yeah, right – it’s the same sort of thing that they use for their terror campaign against the Palestinian people. In Singapore, the government is publishing detailed data on each known case, virtually identifying people. There’s an article from a journal from MIT which calls – this is an actual real quotation – for “discriminating – legally – against those who are” a “disease risk” [*MIT Technology Review*, 17 March].

Then there is the exacerbation of nationalism and xenophobia. So Germany actually has, right now at least, more ventilators than it’s using. But the government is saying: These ventilators are for Germans. And those that don’t agree that they should be reserved for Germans would be responsible for letting Germans die. So says the German government, which is supposedly one of the more enlightened according to the bourgeois liberals. In the *New York Times* (17 March), a German columnist, Jochen Bittner, called for “European solidarity” – with Europeans (period). He was clearly choosing his language quite consciously. He meant just that: solidarity of, by and for – and just for – Europeans. Meanwhile, about half of the 26 Schengen Zone European countries have fully or partially closed their borders. This is Fortress Europe.

Meanwhile, here in the U.S., Trump is railing against a so-called “foreign” virus or “Chinese” virus – while the Democratic Party, as we know, is in the business of beating the drums against China. *Foreign Policy* has a China-bashing article today, titled “China Tries to Cast Itself as Global Savior as U.S. and EU Focus on Virus at

Home.” Basically, they’re beating the drums against China, seeking to whip up the anti-China war drive, which is also being manifested in the fervent backing and propaganda in favor of the counterrevolutionary riots in Hong Kong. The current issue of *The Internationalist* has a very important, very deeply researched and documented, crucial article about Hong Kong, which everybody should read.

In terms of health care, the situation is also exacerbated by decades of cuts and privatizations. Those have accelerated since the 2008 financial meltdown, but they go back decades. They occurred under Carter, they occurred under Clinton, they occurred under Obama, et al. And then if you go back, they occurred under Reagan, under Bush I and II, and now under Trump and Pence. Together with his bunch of CEOs that appear with him to talk about what to do about the crisis, and who are just slobbering to slurp up some of the 1.5 trillion dollars they’re preparing to hand out in free money.

There is a crash in process, an economic crash. If you follow the economics, you know that what happens on Wall Street is sort of the froth at the top, but basically the response of the bourgeois government is to push interest rates down to zero or below to try to avoid the credit system seizing up. It’s not going to work. It can’t. The Marxist economist Michael Roberts, who has a blog called “The Next Recession,” points out that interest rates are already super-low, and cheap money for investors – basically, handing out wads of cash at super-low interest rates – has blown the debt bubble up once again, even more than when that bubble popped in 2008. And there are huge numbers of “zombie companies,” which are essentially living off debt. There’s mass quantities of corporate debt. Meanwhile, oil prices have fallen very rapidly.

In an economic depression, all of the social contradictions will be exacerbated to the maximum. That doesn’t necessarily mean there would be a mass radicalization all of a sudden. When there’s an economic crash, a terrible depression, like the Great Depression, many, many workers are scared, understandably. They’re scared because they have either lost their job or they fear that they will. That they won’t be able to feed their kids. That they’re going to be living on the street. Very frequently

it takes some time to recover a little bit of confidence. Sometimes that happens when there’s a little bit of an upturn: that happened in the Great Depression when there was a momentary upturn that brought some workers back to work. In any event, we would be foolish if we were to believe that an economic crash in a linear way simply produces radicalization. But it again shows the stark realities of this society, and particularly among young people this is going to lead to a lot of fundamental rethinking about the capitalist society we live in.

If you’re looking at Italy, it’s a really terrible situation, there is medical triaging in Italy. So that means if there’s not enough resources, if there are not enough ventilators, for example, a doctor would basically have to choose who lives and who dies. That’s an agonizing choice. Is it the six-year-old or their grandmother? So doctors sometimes face that horrific choice and there are various ways that they try collectively or individually to figure that out. But I think that a lot of people will be wondering what kind of society finds itself having to do that. And there’s economic and social triaging, obviously. Obviously. If you cannot go to the hospital, if you have no way of paying for it, if you are scared to go to work, if you’re working sick because otherwise you lose your job... With all this, whole categories of the population would be slated, literally, to be thrown into the heap of dead and dying.

In Michael Roberts’ blog, he talks about the reactionary classical economist, Rev. Thomas Malthus, who believed that there were too many of what he called “unproductive” poor people in the world. And he thought that regular plagues and disease were necessary and inevitable to make economies more productive. There are some ecologists today who actually say things like, “Oh well, in the face of the coronavirus crisis, at least some people will die off and that might ease the climate situation.” I’ve read horrific things like that. But then Roberts goes on and talks about a British conservative journalist named Jeremy Warner, who wrote the following about the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that it primarily kills the elderly: “Not to put too fine a point on it, from an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents.” [The quota-



Fabio Bucciarelli

Medieval scenes playing out in Italy where over 11,500 have died of COVID-19, overwhelmingly among the elderly. Red Cross workers prepare to transport patient to hospital in Bergamo province.

tion is from Warner’s column in the Daily Telegraph, 3 March.] Talk about bourgeois economics as “the philosophy of misery”!

So finally, just some basic questions that are raised by this situation and ought to go into what we discuss with people. Like, why is there no crash program to make ventilators, to build hospitals, to mass-produce the medicines that Cuba has invented, for example, and is inventing? Of course, luxury high-rise construction continues for now, and actually construction was declared an “essential service” in New York. Compare that to the claim of bourgeois ideologues as well as the fake left, that China, despite political or cultural differences, is (according to them) supposedly essentially the same kind of society in socioeconomic terms as the U.S. – in other words, capitalist. We come across this all the time, but now they’re confronted with some massive basic facts. Like the fact that, in days, China carried out a crash program to build new hospitals, and massively repurposed others. It brought 19,000 health workers from Shanghai to Wuhan, etc.

Even after the Stalinist bureaucracy had dismantled or reduced some important benefits coming out of China’s revolution, the huge difference in health policy and its massive results now underscore that China is not a capitalist country. Rather, it is still the state that was established in the 1949 Chinese Revolution, which overthrew the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, dealt a massive world-historic blow to imperialism and established a bureaucratically deformed workers state. What about Cuba? Just to end up where I started. Cuban medicine really is in the forefront. Cuban doctors are being sent to and volunteering to go to other countries.

Then there was the cruise ship that went from one country to another and nobody would let it in, with coronavirus patients that only Cuba was prepared to accept. That inevitably recalls the *St. Louis*, that ship in May 1939 bringing Jewish refugees from Hamburg, Germany fleeing or trying to flee from the Nazis.¹ A movie about the *St. Louis* was made, called *Voyage of the Damned* [1976]. Now this ship of coronavirus patients

was another voyage of the damned, but this time it had the opposite outcome. They were not turned back. Cuba welcomed them.

The United States is a barbaric country founded on slavery, where the question of health care is also a manifestation of racism, where the opposition to even a moderately civilized bourgeois policy on medicine is rooted largely in racism, as is so much else in this society. Here, above all, it really will require a socialist revolution just to get people medicine in a way which they need, in a rational way, on the basis of an international socialist planned economy based on the soviet democracy of workers councils, a proletarian democracy of workers councils from here to Italy – and in the Chinese and Cuban deformed workers states, too, where capitalist rule has been overthrown – and all around the world.

A friend that we met in Cuba, at the Havana Trotsky conference in May, recently posted that his work has been reduced to two days a week, but he still gets full pay. He made an ironic joke about those who claim that Cuba is some kind of “state capitalism.” And why can’t we buy Cuban medicine here? Because of the cuarentena, the quarantine. I’m not talking about the quarantine of people with coronavirus. The “quarantine” is what John F. Kennedy called the embargo he put on Cuba, in October of 1962. He said he was quarantining Cuba. So the blockade of Cuba is now exacerbated by the Helms-Burton Act, whose Title III targets, among other things, supplies for crucial medical apparatus production in Cuba.

Now is the time for us to find ways to recruit new people, to educate new people, to bring them into the communist movement. This is a period of very scary, very daunting, unavoidable realities which inevitably are going to shake up and jolt a huge number of people. What we need to explain to them is the communist program, what is Marxism, what is Trotskyism, why – if they actually want to fight for a civilized society – we need to fight for socialism against barbarism, and as the Class Struggle Workers Portland declaration ends, “the only way forward is class struggle.” Fighting for the program of revolutionary class struggle is what we need to win them to now. ■



Internationalists on Wall Street in New York City, 23 February 2019, protesting U.S. coup attempt in Venezuela and blockade of Cuba. Down with the Helms-Burton Act! Defend Cuba, China, North Korea and Vietnam against imperialism and counterrevolution.

¹ The *St. Louis* was originally slated to disembark in Cuba, but the U.S. puppet regime there turned it away. The ship then headed to the U.S., but invoking the racist Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924, the Roosevelt government turned the desperate refugees away as well, forcing the ship to head back to Europe.

In the Time of Coronavirus

A Tale of Two Cities: Wuhan – New York

The discovery of the infectious disease now referred to as COVID-19 in clusters of cases in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019 set off alarm bells among Chinese health officials. On December 30, they shut down the suspected source, a market that sold live seafood, poultry and wildlife. The World Health Organization (WHO) was informed on December 31 of a “pneumonia of unknown origin.” Racing to identify the pathogen that caused the mysterious disease, they identified the coronavirus by January 8 and the news was broadcast on China Central Television the next day. Thus claims by the bourgeois media and politicians in the U.S. that China initially “covered up” the outbreak are a flat-out lie.

However, amid uncertainty about how infectious the new disease was and whether it could be transmitted among humans, with no new reported cases, local officials did not immediately follow up initial discoveries with energetic public health measures. But when on January 18-19 the number of cases suddenly shot up, growing exponentially and appearing in major cities, the Communist Party leadership in Beijing took notice. With the annual Spring Festival (lunar New Year), when hundreds of millions of Chinese travel around the country, about to begin two days later, the central government imposed a quarantine on Wuhan (population 11 million) on January 23, blocking travel to and from it and other major cities in Hubei province.

So despite some initial confusion and missteps, the apparatus of the Chinese bureaucratically deformed workers state shifted gears and went all out. When it did, it quickly achieved results. Although the virus had already escaped Wuhan, and therefore the chance to isolate it to relatively limited clusters was lost, the subsequent containment effort went far beyond anything the world has ever seen before. No large city had previously been cordoned off for public health reasons. But China did much more, shutting down long-distance travel, closing busi-

nesses, factories and schools nationwide, putting “hot spots” under lockdown, and up to 400 million people (out of a population of 1.5 billion) under some degree of quarantine.

Doctors and state officials wrangled with how to effectively mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus. At first the medical system was inundated with new cases. Hundreds showing symptoms rushed to hospital entrances seeking help. They jammed into crowded corridors, probably infecting others. There was a run on masks. By the beginning of February, China confirmed 28,276 cases and 564 deaths. But in a very few days the chaos was brought under control, by the authorities – and also by tens of thousands of volunteers. World Health Organization (W.H.O.) vice president Dr. Bruce Aylward, who led a mission to evaluate China’s effort, reported: “They’re mobilized, like in a war, and it’s fear of the virus that was driving them.”¹

Although much of China’s urban medical system is private – a betrayal of the gains of the 1949 Chinese Revolution – the response to the coronavirus outbreak was not. Quickly, the superiority of a centrally planned economy was shown. With clear and decisive swiftness, orders went out to erect two new hospitals, Huoshenchang Hospital and Leishenshan Hospital, to treat COVID-19 patients. That was accomplished, providing 2,600 new beds in two hospitals fully equipped with the latest technology – *all within ten days, from start to finish*. Webcams were set up so that millions across China could

¹ “Inside China’s All-Out War on the Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, 4 March 2020.



Reuters

In Wuhan, China, after some initial missteps, everyone who tested positive for coronavirus was hospitalized or sent to an isolation center. Above: treating coronavirus patients, January 25.

nesses, factories and schools nationwide, putting “hot spots” under lockdown, and up to 400 million people (out of a population of 1.5 billion) under some degree of quarantine.

follow this amazing feat, with dozens of excavators on the first day. In the capitalist West it takes *years* to build a new hospital.

It wasn’t haphazard at all. China had done it before. In 2003, Xiatangshan Hospital in Beijing was built in seven days to treat the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic. Today, plans for such an emergency already existed, so that suppliers and workers could be mobilized quickly. Sports and exhibition centers, gymnasiums and building complexes were converted into isolation centers with 10,000 more beds for those with milder cases. Tens of thousands of medical workers were sent or volunteered from other provinces to tackle the spread at ground zero. Special trains were sent with fruits and vegetables, which were then distributed by volunteers to those in locked-down neighborhoods. It was a national effort, millions pitched in.

Most importantly, those with symptoms, but also others who were at risk, *were tested and quarantined*. The Report of the W.H.O.-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 stated: “Mea-

sures were taken to ensure that all cases were treated.” Patients waited for the four-hour processing of their results at the fever clinics, rather than being sent home. Moreover, testing was free. Compare that to the U.S., where in the epicenter of New York, for weeks it was almost impossible to get tested, due to a huge shortage of test kits, and then people had to wait days for the results.

In Wuhan, if you tested positive and had mild symptoms, you were placed in an isolation center where you received treatment. Severe cases were sent to the hospitals. People were *not* sent home to wait it out and combat an unrelenting fever, hacking cough and difficulty breathing on their own. Why? It sounds ludicrous to even ask such a question, but they did not want people spreading the virus to their family members. Dr. Aylward noted that “75 to 80 percent of all clusters are in families. You get the odd ones in hospitals or restaurants or prisons, but the vast majority are in families.... So they try to isolate you from your relatives as quickly as possible, and find everyone you had contact within 48

AFP/Getty Images



In Wuhan, Chinese government built two new hospitals in ten days to deal with coronavirus crisis. Above left: at start of construction on January 24; above right: on February 2, the day before hospitals began receiving patients.



Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

In New York City people were sent home, leading to uncontrolled spread of disease. Above: refrigerated trailers serving as temporary morgues as hospitals run out of space for the more than 15,000 dead (as of April 25).



At March 2 press conference, New York governor Andrew Cuomo (left) bragged that he and NYC mayor Bill de Blasio agreed that “we have the best healthcare system on the planet right here in New York” and that “we don’t even think it’s going to be as bad as it was in other countries.”

hours before that.”

As the W.H.O. mission report summed it up, “In the face of a previously unknown virus, China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history.” So that was China’s response.

A Tragicomedy of Errors

Now, what about New York? If, faced with a new disease whose nature was only beginning to be known, the Stalinist bureaucracy in China was slow to impose drastic measures over a period of ten days (when the number of cases seemed frozen and there was as yet no evidence of human-to-human transmission), the bourgeois politicians in the U.S. and the capitalist medical system had two solid months to prepare. Their failure/refusal to undertake massive testing,² the destruction of stockpiles of critical equipment and failure to replace them; the shortage of hospital beds due to cutbacks – these are nothing short of criminal. And then there’s the delusional president Donald Trump, who said of the virus, “like a miracle, it will disappear.”

But it’s not just the megalomaniacal Republican CEO of American capitalism, who imagines he can dictate the course of hurricanes and has a miracle cure for COVID-19. The Democrats are no less responsible for the disastrous state of the U.S. medical system. For years they presided over the grotesque profit-gouging and skyrocketing inequalities of the “your-money-or-your-health” racket, shoveling billions into the coffers of the medical insurance companies through Obamacare while cutting back on hospital funding, eliminating surge capacity in the depression that has followed the 2007-09 financial crisis. They, too, prepared the way for the catastrophe that the coronavirus crisis has unleashed on working people. On March 2, Democratic NY governor Andrew Cuomo bragged at a press conference:

“We have the best healthcare system in the world here. And excuse our arrogance as New Yorkers, I speak for the Mayor also on this one, we think we have the best healthcare system on the planet right here in New York. So, when you’re saying what happened in other countries vs.

² There was the order from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) not to test anyone except those hospitalized with a severe fever and who had traveled to China. Plus the CDC’s botched test kit, its refusal to use existing W.H.O. tests and its blocking of locally developed tests.

what happened here, we don’t even think it’s going to be as bad as it was in other countries. We are fully coordinated, we are fully mobilized, this is all about mobilization of a public health system.”

Three days later, on March 5, after the appearance of cases of COVID-19 in New Rochelle (a lawyer who worked in Manhattan) and in NYC itself, Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio admitted, “You have to assume it could be anywhere in the city.” Even in the second week of March, “senior Health Department officials believed” that widespread testing “was a waste of limited resources. They urged instead a public awareness campaign to tell people with mild symptoms to stay home and not infect others, or themselves, by going to testing centers.”³ On top of this, the mayor and governor were sparring as de Blasio called for a lockdown while Cuomo on March 20 ordered social distancing plus closing non-essential businesses.

In this chaotic scene of last-minute improvisation, it was clear to all that the hospitals would soon be overwhelmed with coronavirus patients. By our count, New York City has closed at least 69 hospitals since the 1970s, and in the last two decades New York State has lost 20,000 hospital beds through cuts, dropping from 73,000 in 2000 to 53,000 in 2020, according to records obtained by the New York State Nurses Association (*New York Post*, 17 March). Cuomo’s answer was to call

³ “How Delays and Unheeded Warnings Hindered New York’s Virus Fight,” *New York Times* (8 April).

for “the Army Corps of Engineers to leverage its expertise, equipment and people power to retrofit and equip existing facilities ... to serve as temporary medical centers.”⁴ The next day de Blasio called to use the Javits Convention Center on Manhattan’s West Side as a “medical surge facility.”

So on March 23, Cuomo announced plans to convert the colossal 840,000-square-foot Javits Center in Manhattan into four emergency federal hospitals with a capacity of 1,000 beds on the main showroom floor in just seven days. The National Guard and Army engineers were deployed to assist in carrying this out, along with 320 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials to staff the hospitals. With U.S. and New York State flags hanging above, the beds were “designed to promote comfort and hope,” each adorned with a potted plant. According to the governor, “That’s the New York way, that’s the American way” to “kick coronavirus ass.”

By April 1, the U.S. Defense Department announced it was set up and good to go. Except there were some problems. To begin with, the commander of the JNYMS (Javits New York Medical Station), New York National Guard Col. Dennis Deeley, said bluntly: “I don’t know how to manage a hospital.” He was commanding a couple of hundred military doctors, nurses and other medical personnel, along with 400 National Guardsmen. Moreover, it seems that the Javits medical facility was *not intended for coronavirus patients or cases*. Hello?! The plan was to keep the JNYMS “COVID-free” and accept only “low acuity patients,” like those recovering from surgery or with a diabetes flare-up.⁵

Next problem: where are the patients? Cuomo held a press conference

⁴ “Andrew Cuomo: Mobilize Military to Fight the Virus,” *New York Times* (16 March).

⁵ “Inside the Javits Center: New York’s militarized, makeshift hospital,” *Washington Post* (5 April).



Inside the Javits militarized medical center. The National Guard commander admitted “I don’t know how to manage a hospital.” But where were the patients?



USNS Comfort docked at Pier 90 in Manhattan on April 2. Its 1,000 beds sat mostly empty, its 1,200 crew mostly idle as the Navy wanted to keep it COVID-19-free. It was never more than a PR stunt.

in the Javits station on March 24 in front of stacks of boxes of medical equipment. But aside from the odd COVID-19 patient trying to sneak into the facility, *there were no non-coronavirus cases*. With everyone sheltering in place, “Victims of trauma and other ailments vanished from emergency departments as automobile traffic and crime rates – except for domestic violence – plunged” (*Washington Post*, 10 April). And with over 7,000 emergency ambulance calls a day, the city declared new EMS (Emergency Medical Service) guidelines prohibiting the use of CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation) in the field, for fear of spreading the virus. Patients that could not be resuscitated on the spot were declared dead. They weren’t taken to the Javits.

Then there was that hospital ship. On March 18, Governor Cuomo announced amid great fanfare that the USNS *Comfort* was coming. On March 29, President Trump saw the ship off from Naval Station Norfolk, proclaiming it “a 70,000-ton message of hope and solidarity” with the people of New York, “a place I love.” (You think?) But, alas, the *Comfort*, with its 1,000 beds, 1,200 personnel, “12 fully equipped operating rooms, radiology services, medical lab, pharmacy, optometry lab, CAT-scan and two oxygen producing plants” was *also never intended for coronavirus cases*. With 20 patients aboard and strict admittance guidelines meant to keep the virus off-board, the hospital ship was, as the head of Northwell Health put it, “a joke.”

The Navy’s hospital ships have always been a public relations exercise more than genuine medical assistance. After Hurricane Maria in 2017, the *Comfort* was deployed to Puerto Rico, where it “mostly sat empty in the San Juan harbor” while the U.S. “dispatched 10,000+ troops to ‘keep order,’ distribute some meals-ready-to-eat and bottled water for a few days and install some mobile cell towers.”⁶ The *Comfort* admitted only six patients a day while the numbers dead surpassed 4,000. After the 2010 earthquake ravaged Haiti, the *Comfort* reportedly performed 8,000 operations, while “the more than 800 Cuban medical personnel and Cuban-trained Haitian doctors performed over 100,000 operations and serious medical procedures.”⁷

So here we have nurses, doctors

⁶ “Colonial Capitalist Disaster in Puerto Rico,” *The Internationalist* No. 50, Winter 2017.

⁷ *The Internationalist* No. 31, Summer 2010.

and orderlies working 12-hour+ shifts in overflowing hospitals, desperately caring for coronavirus patients and armed with limited protective gear, rendering them exposed to the deadly virus. Hospitals running out of body bags as refrigerator trailer morgues stockpile the dead to be transported to mass graves on Hart Island off the Bronx ... and the *Comfort* and *Javits* are virtually empty. As angry medical professionals denounce this atrocity, Cuomo announces that Javits would become COVID-only, and non-COVID patients would be transferred from the convention center to the ship. Except when the eleven patients were transferred, they turned out to be – you guessed it – COVID-positive.

On April 16, it was announced that all medical personnel were being withdrawn from the Javits Center. At its highest point it had 138 patients. On April 22 it was announced that the USNS *Comfort* was no longer needed in New York and would be departing to its home port in Norfolk, Virginia.

That brings us to the Central Park field hospital across Fifth Avenue from Mt. Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. You've probably heard of it: a 14-tent hospital with 68 beds, ventilators, x-ray machines and 98 staffers, that's taking in coronavirus patients from the overloaded hospital. However, this facility belongs to Samaritan's Purse, a proselytizing evangelical Christian outfit run by Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, the U.S.' most famous evangelical leader, and a notorious anti-Islam and homophobic bigot. Graham has long proclaimed Islam as "a very wicked and evil religion" and in 2015 proposed a ban on Muslims entering the U.S. He has worked in tandem with U.S. occupation forces during the 2016-17 battle for Mosul, Iraq.

Samaritan's Purse is known for utilizing international disaster relief to aggressively promote Christianity in Muslim-majority countries. Moreover, in New York City, all volunteers and healthcare workers in its field hospital are required to sign an explicitly transphobic and homophobic "statement of faith," which among other things declares marriage as "exclusively the union of one genetic male and one genetic female."⁸ On his Twitter feed, Graham declared, "Everyone needs to wake up to the dangers of the transgender lie." He has proclaimed gay people "the enemy" and said that COVID-19 has spread "because of the sin that's in the world."

There has been opposition to Samaritan's Purse and fears of homophobic discrimination, with one protester arrested outside the field hospital. Given Graham's notoriety, it's hard to believe that Mt. Sinai, de Blasio and Cuomo didn't know who they were dealing with. The fact that such a bigot could be given official sanction is an indication of what a god-awful mess the New York response to the coronavirus has been: any charlatan can get in on the action. And the treatment for COVID-19 patients in the Samaritan's Purse

⁸ Graham said that a "handful" of people had been turned away because they refused to sign the bigoted "statement of faith," which he described as non-negotiable: "If they agree with it they'll sign it, if they don't agree with it then they move on" (see "Questions mount over Christian group behind Central Park Covid-19 hospital," London *Guardian*, 19 April).



People standing in line in Elmhurst, Queens, New York, April 1.

hospital is hydroxychloroquine, the anti-arthritis and anti-malarial medication being promoted by President Trump. Many hospitals have stopped prescribing this medication after indications it has caused serious cardiac arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat) which can be fatal.

Why the Coronavirus Ravaged Corona

The big question is *why* the overflow facilities weren't filled to the brim in the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States. Just look at the raw statistics: according to the NYC Department of Health, to date there have been 141,754 cases of diagnosed COVID-19, but only 36,723 have been hospitalized. (Altogether there have been 15,411 confirmed and probable deaths in NYC due to the coronavirus.)⁹ What happened to the other 105,000+ cases of people who tested positive (and likely tens of thousands more who have had symptoms but have not been able to get tested) yet were not hospitalized? Answer: most never made it past the triage tents set up outside the hospitals, but were sent home because only severe cases were admitted.

So with all the talk of "flattening the curve," "social distancing," "shelter in place" and masks, *the way that the New York City medical authorities managed to avoid a complete breakdown of the hospital system was by sending large numbers of coronavirus-positive people back out into the community* instead of isolating and hospitalizing them! This is *guaranteed* to spread the virus. For the vast majority, this meant going back to their families, even though it was known that in China three-quarters of "community transmission" was to family members or others in the same residence. This is an obvious reason why the disease has spread so quickly in the Corona section of Queens, New York, where tens of thousands of immigrant workers live jam-packed in tiny apartments.

Moreover, as soon as patients were "stabilized" – i.e., without acute fever for several days – they were discharged to make room for others, even though by now there is plenty of evidence of relapses. As the number of discharged COVID-19 patients grew, New York City authorities decided to make a very limited attempt at isolation, citing the experience of "Asian cities" (Wuhan). So they contracted to rent 11,000 rooms in empty

⁹ See <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page> (consulted 24 April 2020).

hotels for "healthcare workers, New Yorkers discharged from hospitals and those who are showing symptoms but live in cramped quarters that make social distancing impossible" (*Politico*, 13 April). Except, just as with the overflow "medical" facilities like the militarized Javits Center, when isolation is tried under capitalism, it turns into a caricature.

Recently, a scandal broke out when several of the "recovering" COVID-19 patients died in Hilton Garden Inn hotel in Manhattan. It turns out, first, that there were no emergency medical personnel – much less lifesaving equipment – in the hotels. Second, the whole thing was managed by a Texas company, Crewfacilities.com, which judging by its web site specializes in putting up military personnel, oilfield crews and the like. To top it off, monitoring consisted of twice-daily phone checks by temps from a Brooklyn staffing company. They were supposed to summon medical help if the phone was not answered, but it seems their protocols "were not tightly followed" (*New York Times*, 24 April).

It gets worse: a little over one-third of these rooms are occupied. Why? It turns out that two different agencies deal with city-contracted hotel rooms, and navigating them is an ordeal. Those dis-

charged from a hospital are dealt with by the Office of Emergency Management (OEM). Those in homeless shelters go through a separate bureaucracy, the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), which has its own block of 2,500 hotel rooms. But if a person has tested positive for the virus but has *not* been hospitalized, they have to call 311 to request an isolation unit, and then they are referred to a "partner agency," the DHS or a hospital (*The City*, 16 April). Result of this labyrinth: over 8,000 hotel rooms which have been contracted sit empty.

The helter-skelter response of New York City to the crisis is a reflection of the capitalist system, in which bourgeois politicians, religious and other shysters compete for influence, while profit calculations stop the production of vital medical equipment¹⁰ and not only drive private hospitals but also public facilities, which are constantly under pressure to cut costs rather than provide a needed social service. The experience of two cities – Wuhan and New York City – in the coronavirus crisis is a *powerful proof of the qualitative superiority of a centralized, socialized planned economy* which is geared to fill social needs rather than the chaos of capitalism.

At the same time, the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy claims that there can be coexistence with the capitalist system, despite the virulent campaign of China-bashing by all sectors of the U.S. bourgeoisie. It continues to push this dangerous illusion even as the coronavirus debacle has shown just how deadly and dangerous capitalism is to all humanity. This and the counterrevolutionary threat of capitalist and pro-capitalist forces inside China are further proofs of the need for the workers to take political power away from this privileged, nationalist caste and establish the revolutionary proletarian democracy of workers councils, joining their sisters and brothers in the capitalist countries in the struggle for international socialist revolution. ■

¹⁰ See "How Capitalism Sabotaged Ventilator Production," *The Internationalist*, 14 April 2020.

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Workers Fight...

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Allied Trades District Council 35 will also follow suit, with the union issuing a stay-at-home order for its thousands of members that will go into effect after the close of business on April 6.

“The moves come just a few days after the Massachusetts Building Trades Council, which represents 75,000 union members ranging from carpenters and painters to ironworkers and laborers, urged [Governor Charles] Baker to shut down all but emergency work for the rest of April.”

In auto, as workers called to shut down the industry, the Big 3 companies and the leaders of the United Auto Workers (UAW) at first agreed to a “rotating partial shutdown of facilities.” But hours later, after Fiat Chrysler reported that another employee at its Sterling Heights, Michigan, plant had tested positive for coronavirus, workers on the early shift on March 18 refused to go in. Similar strikes quickly spread through Detroit-area auto plants, forcing the auto giants to shut down. On March 24 it was announced that two Fiat Chrysler workers had died.

A Wave of Walkouts by “Essential Workers” Endangered by the Bosses

Even in jobs that truly are essential in providing basic necessities, the bosses’ criminal disregard for workers’ health and safety has led to widespread protests, walkouts and strikes. Workers in meatpacking plants are among those most at risk, with thousands standing shoulder-to-shoulder in areas awash in fluid in near-freezing temperatures. Yesterday, Smithfield Foods was forced to close its Sioux Falls, South Dakota, pork plant, where 293 out of the 3,700 employees tested positive for coronavirus, 40% of all cases in the state (*Newsweek*, 12 April).

The overwhelmingly black, Hispanic and immigrant workers in the packinghouse industry have also been in the forefront of those taking action.¹ On March 23, dozens of workers at a non-union Perdue Farms chicken plant in Kathleen, Georgia, walked out over unsafe working conditions. On April 1, nearly 1,000 workers at the JBS beef plant in Greeley, Colorado, organized by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), walked off the job after ten workers had tested positive for COVID-19.

One of the main clusters of COVID-19 in the country has been Albany, Georgia. A key fact is that “The town is ringed by a series of a half-dozen meatpacking plants, where thousands of workers are employed” (*Payday Report*, 10 April). At Tyson’s Food in nearby Camilla, Georgia, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) reported that two of its members had already died. But while a RWDSU press release declared, “Poultry Industry’s Delayed Covid-19 Response Is Killing America’s Essential Workers,” the union did not call any action.

The warehouses of Amazon, the e-commerce and distribution giant, have been a focal point of protests. The rabidly labor-hating company has so far managed to crush union-organizing campaigns in the U.S. (see “Unionize Amazon and Whole Foods!”

¹ The meatpacking industry has seen huge union battles in which African American, Latino and Native American workers have united in struggle. See “North Carolina Labor Revolt,” in *The Internationalist* No. 25, January-February 2007.



Nurses at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, New York protest lack of personal protective equipment, March 29.

Internationalist No. 55, Winter 2019). Currently, it is raking in billions as more and more shoppers stuck at home order online. On March 18, workers shut down an Amazon “fulfillment center” in Queens, New York, demanding that production be stopped for a full sanitization of the plant.

Then on March 30, workers at an Amazon warehouse on Staten Island walked out demanding hazard pay, sanitizing and protective equipment after it came out that the company had hushed up cases of COVID-19 at the facility. Amazon retaliated that night by firing Christian Smalls, a supervisor, who had set off the protest. After widespread media coverage, Amazon bosses, including owner Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, met to plan a strategy on how to deal with the protests and reports that workers at 14 or more Amazon facilities had been infected.

After the meeting, the company’s chief legal counsel issued a memo calling Smalls, who is black, “not smart, or articulate,” as part of a planned racist PR campaign to smear him and make him “the face of the entire union/organizing movement.” The next day, March 31, employees at Amazon-owned Whole Foods stores across the country staged a sickout, demanding paid leave for quarantined workers, hazard pay



Protest initiator Chris Smalls at March 30 action outside Staten Island Amazon facility. That night he was fired.

and health-care coverage for part-time and seasonal workers. And on April 6, protesters were back outside the Staten Island plant chanting, “Shut it down, clean it up!”

Similar protests have taken place at Amazon locations in Chicago and Detroit. The company, which is already the second-largest private employer in the U.S., has announced plans to hire another 100,000 workers. Meanwhile, Instacart, the grocery store delivery app, says it plans to sign up another 300,000 “contractors,” a designation it and other “gig economy” employers use to deny their employees rights. On March 30, Instacart workers held protests demanding company-paid PPE, hazard pay, and paid time off for workers affected by COVID-19.

And at the Trader Joe’s grocery store chain, workers who have been fighting for a union are protesting unsafe working conditions. The bosses’ response, in the midst of the pandemic, has been an intense anti-union campaign, as managers lecture “crew members” about the “dangers” of organizing. In Louisville, Kentucky, TJ employee Kris King formed a Facebook page for workers to discuss the company’s response to the coronavirus crisis. On March 28, the company fired King, saying, “We don’t operate by letting crew talk amongst themselves” (*New York Times*, 2 April).

These are only a few of the instances of workers being driven to take action, demanding safe conditions of employment in the face of a stark threat to their lives. Other examples include:

- On March 20, International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Locals 10 and 34 in Oakland, California, protested, threatening a shutdown to demand that facilities be cleaned daily by professionals. They also demanded protection for the crew of the contaminated *Grand Princess* cruise ship that is being held in quarantine offshore.
- On March 24, workers represented by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) at the Bath Iron Works shipyard in Maine walked out, calling for closure of the shipyard, owned by General Dynamics, during the Covid-19 crisis and that workers continue to be paid.
- On March 25, mostly black sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, members of Teamsters (IBT) Local 249, held a two-hour strike and rally, using trucks to block entrances to the Bureau of Environmental Services, to demand protective masks, better gloves, more work

boots and hazard pay to cover medical expenses if they get sick from the virus.

- On March 30, General Electric workers represented by the International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) protested at company headquarters in Boston, demanding better protections against coronavirus and that GE rehire laid-off workers to manufacture urgently needed ventilators to treat COVID-19 patients.
- On April 6, in Chicago, a hundred workers at two suburban factories walked out after co-workers were infected; at a factory making Mexican desserts, the UFCW demanded that the company pay workers who self-quarantine for 14 days, as well as providing hazard pay of \$2/hour for those who stay at work.
- On April 7, “gig workers” for Target-owned national shop-and-deliver app Shipt walked out demanding PPE, paid sick time, hazard pay, and protesting pay cuts imposed during the pandemic. Shipt is notorious for its abuse of workers and its “deactivation” (firing) of any who express any criticism, online or offline, of its policies.

Class-Struggle Unionism vs. Sellout Labor Bureaucracy

The big business press is well-aware that “essential workers” are in a potentially very strong position in the present crisis. *Bloomberg Business Week* (7 April) headlined, “Coronavirus Marks the Best and Worst Time for Workers to Strike” and “When Working Means Deadly Risk, Backlash Brews.” It is likely that in the aftermath of the crisis there could be a surge in union organizing. But the present leadership of the U.S. labor movement is incapable of enforcing workers’ demands for safe conditions of employment. That requires something very different: *class-struggle unionism*.

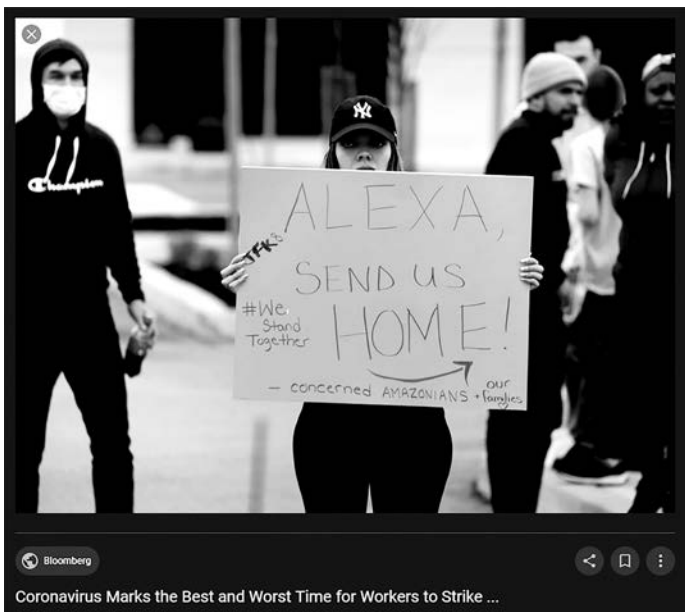
These struggles show the irreconcilable clash between the interests of the working class and those of the bosses, whose only concern for workers is as a source of profit through exploiting their labor. Even in “normal” times, over 5,000 workers are killed on the job every year in the U.S.; tens of thousands more die each year from work-related diseases. The present health crisis is magnified many times over by capitalism, as the pandemic has triggered what will likely be a long economic depression, with tens of millions thrown out of work and pauperized.

What can and must emerge out of this crisis is a newly invigorated labor movement. But a continuation of the same old legalistic “business unionism,” such as has been practiced by the AFL-CIO trade-union bureaucracy for many decades, is a dead end. It is precisely such policies that have led to the decimation of the unions, leaving barely 10% of workers unionized, and only 6% in the private sector. The labor *misleaders* seek a bogus “partnership” with the bosses, who have waged unrelenting class war against the working class and oppressed for decades, and continue to do so today in the coronavirus crisis.

Workers have been hamstrung by the union tops’ subordination to the capitalist Democratic Party, and their obedience to anti-labor laws and institutions of the bosses’ government, including the National Labor Relations Board. The bureaucrats’ loyalty to the capitalist order is exemplified by their welcoming of cops, security guards

Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

Internationalist photo



Wall Street organ Bloomberg Business Week, with photo of Staten Island protest, worries that essential workers are in a strong position to strike.

and prison guards – the armed fist of the ruling class – into the labor movement, while hiding behind “no strike” laws and contract clauses. Class-struggle unionists say: *Hell no – Cops of all kinds out of the unions, and Rip up the bosses’ union-busting laws!*

Workers have the power to win – we need a leadership with a program to use it! The rotten union bureaucracy that sits atop these workers organizations undermines their power by chaining them to the bosses. The corruption scandals that have rocked the UAW are not just about individual enrichment, they are the personalized expression of the politics of *class collaboration*. And just as sellout bureaucrats can’t stop the closing of plants, they can’t protect workers’ health and safety. *Yet it is the workers, who produce the vital goods and services, who are the union.*

What’s desperately needed is a labor movement based upon the program of *class struggle*, of the working class mobilizing its own social power. The economic “rank-and-fileism” pitched by some currents on the left as a supposed alternative to the entrenched labor bureaucracy deliberately sidesteps sharp social and political issues and evades the need for working-class leadership with program to win the class war. In a major crisis of capitalist society like today’s, such an approach is doubly bankrupt.

Tens of millions of workers in the multiracial working class – in many places largely Latino, African American and immigrant, often poorly paid and poorly protected, with few benefits – desperately need to organize into unions simply to defend their interests, and their lives. To do so, the workers movement must fight not only for narrow sectoral interests but champion the cause of all the oppressed.

Some of the most crucial workers today are undocumented immigrant agricultural laborers, without whose backbreaking toil the country won’t be fed. Yet even as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) declares them essential workers, they can still be picked up and deported by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.). A fighting labor movement must demand *full citizenship for all immigrants*. It must *mobilize workers power to stop raids and deportations*, and to *shut the detention centers* which are a hotbed of COVID-19 infection.

Today, many African American, Latino and Asian workers in the front lines of the battle against the coronavirus have no health insurance. While reformists echo the

“Medicare for All” demand of Bernie Sanders and Democratic Party “progressives,” this is only a Band-Aid. Blacks and Latinos frequently have greater underlying health issues, face discrimination in the racist capitalist medical system and are dying of the virus at twice the rate of whites. A class-struggle workers movement must fight for *socialized medicine*, to provide *free, quality medical care for all!*

What’s desperately needed is a labor movement built upon the old principles of *class against class*, of the working class mobilizing its social power, as the “essential” producers of wealth who make society function. And that means a class-struggle union movement that combats all forms of social oppression, that places itself in the forefront of the struggle against racism, the fight for full equality of women, gays, lesbians and transgender people, and that joins these struggles in a fight to do away with the capitalist system that produces death and destruction for everyone. It means a fight for *revolutionary leadership*.

Capitalism Is Killing Us – Fight for Socialist Revolution!

The one language that the capitalists and their politicians in the Democratic and Republican parties understand is that of power. While they worry that “essential workers” have potential power, the bosses are banking on their ability to bamboozle and intimidate those who are desperately trying to make ends meet and now fear a potentially deadly threat. We who would organize the deeply exploited “wage slaves,” as Karl Marx called them, must be clear-eyed that the recent walkouts are still very small and tentative. They need real power to back them up.

Everywhere, the pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy has posed an obstacle. Even when unions like the UAW, UFCW and RWDSU have taken action, it has been at most sporadic and the initiative has come from below. Where they have made a halfhearted show of organizing behemoths like Walmart, Amazon or fast-food chains, they don’t even try

to build real unions, only setting up flimsy workers centers and often barely even trying to mobilize in-house workers. Why? The union tops won’t risk their “partnership” with the bosses (and real-estate holdings) by defying the anti-labor laws that cripple the unions.

To organize a ferociously anti-labor outfit like Amazon, the key will be bringing to bear the raw power of unions like the Teamsters. And it won’t be done playing by the bosses’ rules. That is why initiatives by class-struggle militants in unionized industries are exceptionally important today and could help open the way for a large-scale campaign to organize the unorganized. At the UPS facility in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, after Teamster Local 25 president wrote a letter to company officials on March 27 denouncing the lack of protections, a flier was issued by union militant Mike Gath, titled “No Safety, No Work!” The leaflet demanded “an independent, all-worker health & safety committee of union stewards and other Chelmsford workers” to ensure compliance by the company. It concluded:

“No safety, no work. If there is no thorough, independent cleaning and disinfection of the facility by Monday, work there should not proceed until it is done. “Union power, workers power – this is a matter of life and death for us all right now.”

A second leaflet, posted on social media on April 3, reiterated these demands and added: “We should be getting hazard pay, which should be double-time. We won’t be sacrificed for their profits. Don’t let the company wait til someone dies on the job.”

Emphasizing that the struggle isn’t limited to a single warehouse or industry, on April 6 Gath and supporters from the Internationalist Group joined in a caravan of app-taxi drivers in Boston, declaring their solidarity and raising the demand for “\$1,000/Week for All Uber, Lyft and Taxi Drivers.” Later that day, it was reported that a worker had died of COVID-19 at UPS’ giant Worldport international hub in Louisville, Kentucky, where some 10,000 workers are employed, handling up to 416,000 packages an hour. On April 10, Gath posted:

“As I have written before, every passing



Workers at UPS Worldport hub in Louisville, Kentucky, where two employees have died of COVID-19.

day shows we need a Nationwide Health and Safety Walkout!

“And we need the whole union to hear that and carry it out. A real fight on this now at UPS would also be crucial for a breakthrough in unionizing FedEx, Amazon, Whole Foods, etc....

“Hazard pay now!

“No Safety, No Work!

“We need a Nationwide Union Health and Safety Walkout at UPS!”

A fighting perspective was put forward by our sisters and brothers of Class Struggle Workers – Portland in a March 18 call for workers action in the coronavirus crisis. It raised a series of demands to require protective gear as decided by the workers; for the formation of health and safety committees representing both unionized and unorganized workers; for full pay for all who are unable to work because of the virus; for occupying vacant properties to provide housing for the homeless; for freeing detainees from I.C.E. concentration camps, and concluded:

“A mass, militant workers movement with a class-struggle leadership would establish *workers commissions* at workplaces to decide appropriate measures, including shutting down where necessary, with no loss in pay, or continuing production with needed safeguards.

“Ultimately, it will take a planned economy capable of redirecting production and distribution of medical equipment, safety equipment and basic necessities for a large-scale outbreak, with workplaces organized with the safety of workers as a central priority, in order to effectively fight a pandemic. That means a fight to end this capitalist system of profit-driven chaos, incompetence, racism and exploitation, and establish a workers government.

“With the lives and livelihoods of so many workers and oppressed people in the balance, the only way forward is class struggle.”

This crisis has opened the eyes of a lot of people who normally don’t give a thought about where the goods and services they consume come from. In these desperate times, it must be made clear that the capitalist system itself constitutes an imminent danger to the lives of working people, the poor, and to humanity as a whole (see “Coronavirus and Capitalism,” *The Internationalist*, 29 March). As the CSWP statement said: “The urgent need for an international revolutionary workers party could not be more clear as the pandemic unfolds.” Such a party must be in the vanguard of a working class fighting to rip state power out of the hands of the capitalist rulers in the fight for international socialist revolution. ■



Solidarity with Boston app-taxi workers at April 6 protest.

Italy...

continued from page 6

a day, fell to 5-20 a day, most of these being of foreigners who have brought it into China from where they live abroad. So China is now quarantining those entering the country. Highlighting this, Apple announced that it is closing all of its stores in the world, except for those in China, which it is reopening.

China's all-out mobilization against the coronavirus was not perfect, with some initial delay in recognizing the gravity of an outbreak of an initially undetermined pathogen, as well as some bureaucratic missteps. But once it became a national priority, the vast superiority of a planned economy in a workers state, albeit bureaucratically deformed, kicked in. China rapidly reassigned not only tens of thousands of medical personnel, but people from all sections of society. It reorganized hospitals to provide specialized care for the acutely sick, built two hospitals in record time (ten days, from start to finish), turned sports arenas and gymnasiums into isolation centers, speeded up the massive use of CT (computerized tomography) scans, and ensured that the population was supplied with food.

All of this and more was documented in an interview with Canadian doctor Bruce Aylward, who led the World Health Organization (WHO) mission of 25 experts that visited China for two weeks in early February to assess the country's response to the coronavirus outbreak (*New York Times*, 4 March) and in the *Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)*. As the WHO report detailed, there was a total lockdown in the epicenter of the pandemic, Wuhan, and in nearby cities. Half of all medical care was moved online so people did not go to the doctor or to hospitals, where they could infect others. Prescriptions for items like insulin or heart medications were delivered to homes. China produced 1.6 million kits for testing per day and the test results were given out within four hours.

Other provinces sent 40,000 medical workers to Wuhan, many of whom were volunteers. Government employees were reassigned. They delivered food, took temperatures or became contact tracers. Fifteen million people had to order food online. It was delivered. Testing was free and the government made it clear that if your insurance ended, the state paid everything if it was Covid-19. On the other hand, the fact that residents of urban areas are covered – or not – by health insurance shows that they do *not* have free health care and



Workers at TNT in Piacenza shut down the plant, March 24.

medicine in China, as used to be the case before the Stalinist bureaucracy introduced privatizing “reforms” begun under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. Today, there are private clinics, joint-venture medical facilities as in the West as well as V.I.P. wards in public hospitals.

Coming off of the successful fight against the coronavirus, which dramatically showed what a planned, centrally directed economy can accomplish, revolutionary communists in China would fight for a fully socialized medical system and free, high-quality health care for all, as part of the Trotskyist program for proletarian political revolution.

The WHO reported: “In the face of a previously unknown virus, China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history.” In response to a *New York Times* journalist who “asked” tendentiously, “Isn’t all of this [the anti-coronavirus mobilization in China] possible only because China is an autocracy?” Aylward responded: “Journalists also say, ‘Well, they’re only acting out of fear of the government,’ as if it’s some evil fire-breathing regime that eats babies. I talked to lots of people outside the system – in hotels, on trains, in the streets at night. They’re mobilized, like in a war, and it’s fear of the virus that was driving them. They really saw themselves as on the front lines of protecting the rest of China. And the world.”

The scope of the successful actions and coordination in China against the coronavirus could only be done in a workers state with a planned economy. The structural chaos and anarchy of the capitalist economy is determined by production for profit, which renders it incapable of effective coordinated intervention. The current crisis also shows the complete inability of the various capitalist countries

to wage any type of joint effort and coordination to fight against the worldwide pandemic, as every country – and often different regions or states within a single country – pursues its own individual policies of action or inaction. The coronavirus crisis makes crystal clear the urgent need for international socialist planning.



Delivering fresh vegetables to residents of quarantine zone, Wuhan, March 2020.

Workers Fight for Their Lives

Meanwhile, working people in Italy have been exposed to the coronavirus threat by bosses who care nothing for their health and safety. There has been a wave of spontaneous strikes and walkouts across Italy as workers refuse to labor without protective clothing and equipment and safe conditions. The pressure from the ranks in factories and workplaces has been such that the CGIL-CISL-UIL trade-union bureaucrats rushed to try to calm the situation by signing an agreement on March 14 with the bosses and government “for the good of the country,” to ensure that “Italy will not shut down.” This accord resolved very little, leaving safety to the discretion of management. Several FCA (Fiat Chrysler) auto factories and other plants have been closed down for a time, supposedly to implement safe working conditions, as tensions remain high.

Then came further strikes, including widespread coordinated ones on March 18 and 25, notably at the courier services of TNT, SDA, DHL and other logistics worksites. The threat of an unlimited general strike coming from sections of the labor movement forced the government and companies to close down more production. There have also been walkouts at Amazon for safe working conditions, which have put deliveries in crisis. Trade-union and worker safety committees must shut down production in the case of unsafe working conditions. We demand full pay for all those who are out of work because of this crisis.

The Nucleo Internazionalista d’Italia, section of the League for the Fourth International, translated and posted the call “For Workers Action in the Coronavirus Crisis” by Class Struggle Workers – Portland. On social media, the Nid’I called as well for “Tests for all in workplaces!” “No reliance on those who care nothing for the lives of workers!”



Huoshenshan Hospital in Wuhan, China. China built two 1,000-bed hospitals in ten days from start to finish, to treat coronavirus patients in the epicenter of the outbreak.

and “For trade-union/workers control with the presence of doctors!”

Meanwhile, Chinese experts and doctors arrived in Rome on March 12, along with 31 tons of material to fight against the virus. This included ventilators, anti-infection suits, anti-virus surgical masks and other protective equipment, in addition to medicine and samples of plasma to use for research. Other material will soon arrive. The Chinese government is mobilizing to reportedly send 1,000 ventilators, more than 2 million surgical masks (including 100,000 high-tech units), 20,000 protective suits and 50,000 swabs for coronavirus tests. This material will save many lives. Luigi Di Maio, the Italian foreign minister, greeted the arrival of the Chinese doctors, experts, equipment and aid, saying: “This is what we define as solidarity” (*la Repubblica*, 13 March). While a bitter irony that this comes from a minister in this vile bourgeois government, his comment and favorable media coverage contrasts with the virulent anti-communist China-bashing in the U.S.

There have, however, been some physical and verbal attacks against Chinese and others of Asian origin around the country amidst the coronavirus crisis. Almost 300,000 Chinese are living in Italy, 23,000 of them in Prato, a small city outside Florence. They mostly toil in sweatshops and live in the shadows, with little integration. The SI Cobas (rank-and-file unions) have sought to organize there and workers demonstrations have been held. At the same time there have been some beatings of the first union members. The Chinese community in Prato closed down all activity before the nationwide lockdown. As a result, there has not been a single known case of COVID-19 in that community, even after 2,500 returned from China following the lunar New Year holiday (*La Nazione*, 21 March).

The unprecedented successful mobilization in China against the coronavirus, and now China's aid to Italy and the sharing of its valuable scientific research internationally, shows the enormous advantage of a planned economy over capitalist profit-driven anarchy and chaos. While various pseudo-Trotskyist groups, social democrats, anarchists, Bordighists, feminists and various others echo the anti-communist attacks on China by the imperialist powers, we of the Nucleo Internazionalista d’Italia/LFI stand for the unconditional military defense of the Chinese deformed workers state against imperialism and for proletarian revolutionary mobilization against internal forces of counterrevolution that threaten the gains of the 1949 Chinese Revolution, while fighting for socialist revolution in Italy and internationally. ■

As “Chauvinist Hydra” Devours SL/ICL Some History Ex-Trotskyists Would Like to Keep Hidden

Readers of the Spartacist League (SL) press, expecting the mid-April issue of the SL's biweekly *Workers Vanguard*, instead encountered a terse announcement on its website (icl-fi.org): “Notice to Our Readers: *Workers Vanguard* Skipped an Issue in April.” Two weeks before, the prior issue of *WV* (3 April) was a lightweight four-pager, in which the lead article (taking up half the issue) was a Spanish translation of the front page of ... the issue before that. The 3 April issue announced that:

“Due to the COVID-19 crisis and the restrictions on movement imposed in New York City, where we are headquartered, the Political Bureau of the Spartacist League/U.S. has temporarily assumed direct administration of *Workers Vanguard* in place of the Editorial Board and reduced the newspaper to four pages instead of the usual eight. We will maintain *WV*'s biweekly frequency.”

Except then they didn't.

To those following the involution of this erstwhile revolutionary organization – which for three decades had upheld authentic Trotskyism before succumbing to post-Soviet disorientation and despair – the notice was hardly a surprise. For years now, “correction” has followed “correction,” and now cascading notices announce new phases of collapse for the SL and the International Communist League (ICL) it leads.

So what gives? The “hydra,” of course.

That is, the “Struggle Against the Chauvinist Hydra,” as the ICL's bizarre – and transparently dishonest – report on and document from its seventh international conference (*Spartacist*, Summer 2017) were titled. Since rearing its head(s) three years ago, this fearsome creature of myth and legend has consumed the SL/ICL's internal life and dominated its increasingly unhinged and revisionist public ranting. In reality, it embodied the latest – and in some ways most spectacular – of an endless series of crises and convulsions ripping apart the organization.¹

This accelerated the increasingly explicit trashing of the programmatic record that the once-revolutionary Spartacist tendency built up from its inception in the early 1960s, through vital struggles on key programmatic issues. Those included the Russian Question, from the Cuban Revolution through the fight against capitalist reunification of Germany and counter-revolution in the USSR; proletarian opposition to popular fronts, from the U.S. antiwar movement and Indonesia 1965 to Chile 1973 to France in the '80s; the Leninist position on special oppression, notably on women's liberation; black liberation through socialist revolution as strategically key to class struggle in the U.S.; the understanding of “interpenetrated peoples” within the context of the Marxist position on the national question, and many others.

¹ On some of the most recent of these, see: “SL/ICL: Flip-Flopping Toward Oblivion,” *The Internationalist* No. 58, Winter 2020.

This crucial programmatic legacy has been upheld and defended by the Internationalist Group, which was founded by long-time cadres that the SL/ICL purged in 1996 and is the U.S. section of the League for the Fourth International. Over the years we have documented in our press the downward spiral of the SL/ICL as we uphold the revolutionary politics these ex-Trotskyists have abandoned. But while latter-day Spartacist leaders have come and gone, and the SL/ICL's political line has gyrated wildly, they have had one constant: casting us as enemy #1, as they have spewed endless falsifications, distortions and slanders topped with *ad hominem* smears.

But with the advent of the “Chauvinist Hydra,” there was a new element: the public denunciation of one of the SL's own best-known remaining public figures. Joseph Seymour – whose writings on Marxist history and a wide range of political topics were historically key to educating SL cadres and many others (and who also served as a “theoretician” for many of its zigzags in recent decades) – was targeted for a lying smear campaign, labeling him the architect of the organization's supposed four-decade immersion in Anglo-chauvinism. Together with this, “Hydra” ostentatiously dangled a sword of Damocles over the heads of a whole “layer” of other “senior” (i.e., older) cadres. “Time will tell” what their fate would be, *Spartacist* warned.

As we wrote in a section on “The Demise of the Post-Soviet Spartacist Tendency” in the document for the first international conference of the LFI:

“This [the ICL's “Chauvinist Hydra” document] was not just another in the endless series of ICL line changes, this time on the national question, but a wholesale renunciation of Marxism and denunciation of the Spartacist tendency's own historic program and tradition on a central issue. In pretending to fight against chauvinism, it actually promotes more chauvinism and blatantly embraces bourgeois nationalism, while announcing a generational purge of a whole layer of long-time leaders. Akin to [SWP leader] Jack Barnes' 1983 speech, ‘Their Trotsky and Ours,’ which denounced permanent revolution and renounced Trotskyism while bestowing the mantle of ‘continuity’ on an individual rather than the program and ousting the SWP old guard, in some respects this is even more grotesque, publicly smearing and even slandering a number of the ICL's leading spokesmen, sometimes by name.

“The ‘Chauvinist Hydra’ document is a kind of suicide note and auto-obituary officially pronouncing the demise of the ICL as a once-revolutionary tendency.” – “The Struggle to Reforge a Genuinely Trotskyist Fourth International,” *The Internationalist* No. 50, Winter 2017

What the “hydra” had in store for the SL/ICL has come into focus with the declaration that revolutionary “continuity” is personified in the SL/ICL's new self-pro-

claimed “central leader,” who has “guided” recent internal struggles to “regenerate the party.” The most recent issue of *Spartacist* (Spring 2020) states that a plenum of the ICL's International Executive Committee “furthered this struggle.” Among other things, it announces the expulsion of “two now ex-members who had been involved in the work” of the ICL's Greek section, characterizing “the conduct of the two as racist” and “qualitatively worse than other examples of abusive behavior in the ICL.” This follows last year's expulsion of members of their Polish section amidst charges of racism and echoing Polish nationalism and anti-Jewish bigotry.

We do not have any independent means of evaluating these statements and charges. What they do bear witness to, in any case, is the continued deepening of the ICL's crisis. At the programmatic level, it has waded still deeper into a political morass. The SL/ICL's open embrace of bourgeois nationalism, proclaimed in the “Hydra” document, was ostensibly on behalf of oppressed minority nations – particularly the Québécois and Catalans – within junior imperialist states like Canada and Spain. But in fact, the ICL, centered on its U.S. section, has become – there is no other honest way to say it – outright apologists for imperialist chauvinism.

Thus, faced with the exclusion and persecution of Central American and other refugee migrants, they have *opposed and denounced* the elementary internationalist call to “Let Them In” put forward by the IG and LFI. In Britain they have pitched themselves as best builders of “Brexit,” obsessively depicting the European Union's Brussels bureaucrats (and not the chiefs of British imperialism) as the main enemy. In the last election, their British group's slogan “Brexit Now” echoed the chauvinist Tory prime minister Boris Johnson's “Get Brexit Done.” The SL/ICL has similarly denounced the most elementary demands to let in the refugees dying by the boatload off the coasts of Europe. To any would-be revolutionaries, this is a shameful spectacle.

Meanwhile, the SL/ICL's embrace of bourgeois nationalism continues to produce internal turmoil. According to its increasingly bizarre public pronouncements, a heroic, endless battle “Continuing the Fight Against the Hydra” within their organization is “guided by” its new leader who “became

the central leader of the SL/U.S., and later, of the International” (*Workers Vanguard*, 13 December 2019). Yet the record of very real patterns of chauvinist behavior long predates the current scenario. Over two decades ago, we published an in-depth article titled “Crisis in the ICL” (*The Internationalist* No. 5, April-May 1998). For readers (including those in or around the latter-day Spartacist tendency) not content with the SL/ICL's ever-changing official legends about their ongoing crises, we reprint a section of that article beginning under the subtitle “Whose Chauvinism?”

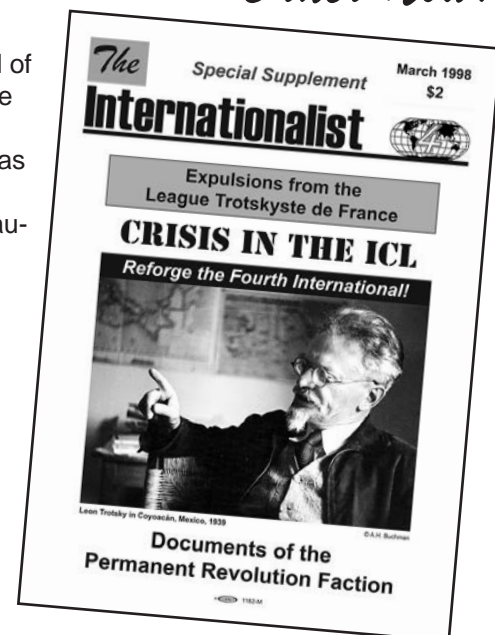
The context was the political struggle launched in late 1997 within the French section of the ICL, the Ligue Trotskyste de France (LTF), by two then-leading members, originally from North Africa, Djura and Zakaria, who formed the Permanent Revolution Faction (PRF) to oppose the organization's abstentionist course and revisions on key programmatic and theoretical issues. For those unfamiliar with the cast of characters, Parks was then the head of the ICL's International Secretariat (I.S.). (She would later be ousted in disgrace.) During the “discussions” in the LTF, the comrades of the PRF noted in a letter to the I.S. that its representative in France “did not even try to reply to the arguments in our document nor to address the key questions of program,” but instead “with open cynicism” said of Djura and Zakaria that “we're going to demoralize them” and “we're going to humiliate them.”

Far from denying this, I.S. secretary Parks reveled in it, while complaining of the LTF membership, “What comrades do not grasp is the need to mock, scorn, and ridicule” the opposition formed by comrades from a former French colony. In addition to the traveling display of wall posters and dunce caps in the LTF office referred to in the text below, the I.S. leader

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Lenin presiding over a meeting of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), the Soviet government, in October 1922. One of Lenin's last struggles was against the Great Russian chauvinism of Stalin.

at one point suggested putting up "posters in their neighborhood." However, this was abandoned because "They would use it as an issue to claim they are being harassed in a way that endangered them." At another point the I.S. leader proposed tailing the opposition comrades if they traveled to a conference of the organization:

"Rather than sending comrades to look for them disembarking the train in the crowded station, I still think it makes much more sense for a comrade or two to travel on the same train they were ticketed for and to walk through each car of the train to ascertain if D+Z are on board. If they are on board, then we can watch where they go when they get out...."

Needless to say, it doesn't stop there, and of course the SL/ICL has never repudiated *any* of this. Nor – to say the least – did it stop with Parks. On site in France during the vile chauvinist campaign described in the text below were two of Parks' protégés. One of them, Adam, was the I.S. rep who led the humiliation campaign and has continued to be the main leader of the ICL's much-diminished French group. The other is the current "central leader" of the ICL. To anyone who would take the SL/ICL's present claims to be fighting chauvinism as good coin, we underline that chauvinism is learned behavior, and such "leaders," and those who follow their example, are past masters not of combating it, but of teaching it..

* * * *

Whose Chauvinism?

The crisis in the ICL came to a head in the Ligue Trotskyiste de France, which is hardly accidental. France has been at the forefront of workers struggles in recent years, and here is where the ICL leaders' claim of a "historical retrogression in the political consciousness of the workers movement" clashes most sharply with reality. Even before the factional struggle broke out, the I.S. recognized that the French section was in crisis. A letter by ICL international secretary Parks (17 October 1997) reported, "The LTF has not recruited anyone since the big strike wave in December '95 when one high school student joined the youth." Given the turbulence in France in recent years, this takes

some doing. Parks continued: "We noted in the [January 1996] IEC memorandum that we would recruit at the expense of our centrist opponents or vice versa. In France, it's vice versa." An I.S. resolution declared, "The LTF as presently constituted and led is not viable as a section of the ICL."

At that time, Parks wrote in another letter to the I.S. (21 October 1997) that "it is very clear from the recent fight in the LTF that comrades Djura and Zakaria are potentially a very large part of the solution to our problems in the LTF...." However, when these comrades a few days later called for a leaflet in the French truckers strike, suddenly they were no longer "a very large part of the solution" but instead the focus of the "problem" in the LTF. Since the I.S. had previously declared the LTF leadership to be centrist, the latter was now declared "right centrist" while the dissident comrades were labeled "left centrists." Yet when they declared the Permanent Revolution Faction in mid-December, the I.S. quickly cobbled together a "majority faction" together with the open rightists. This "plural majority" never answered the minority's political arguments and analysis. Instead, the ICL leadership unleashed a barrage of personal invective tinged with national chauvinism against the PRF comrades.

At the LTF conference, the spokesman for the I.S. was Susan A., a former principal leader of the LTF. In her presentation she demanded "full and detailed confessions" from the PRF comrades about contact with the IG. She cited a 22 August 1997 letter by Djura and Zakaria sharply criticizing the I.S. for abandoning the Iskra perspective toward North Africa.²

Refuting charges of "national narrowness," they wrote that they opposed a policy like that of the Jewish Bund in Russia, in which only North African comrades would be involved in this work. "What do they know of the history of the Bund," the I.S. rep haughtily said of the minority, adding that they must have gotten an e-mail from Norden! Aside from being false, it² [The "Iskra perspective" projected publishing a Trotskyist organ by militants in exile from North Africa, as the Russian Marxists published the original *Iskra* (The Spark) in the early years of the 20th century.]

is deeply insulting to imply that comrades of North African origin are too ignorant to know about the Bund. In discussions last August they cited Isaac Deutscher on the fight over the Bund at the 1903 congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party, a 1986 presentation by an ex-member to the LTF's Commission on North African Work, and a recent book on the *General History of the Bund*.

This arrogant disdain is no aberration coming from the ICL leadership these days. During the fight over Mexico in April 1996, Parks reviled comrade Socorro, a Chicana former farm worker, as "dim" and having her head in a "sewer"! At that time, Parks also referred to the LQB [Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil] as being "dim" about the "dangers of international affiliation." In January *Workers Vanguard* vilely referred to the largely black Brazilian comrades, who are under vicious attack by the capitalist state, as "dangerous hustlers." And now, the LTF's *Le Bolchévik* (Spring 1998), in a thoroughly dishonest article about the French faction fight, publishes extracts of a majority document with the disgusting chauvinist headline: "The PRF Has Found Its Land of Asylum: France." At a time when the popular front government is stepping up deportations, what is this piece of filth supposed to mean?

Then came the vile and absurd accusation by the majority that the comrades of the PRF had "capitulated to French chauvinism." Why? Because the minority hailed the heroic internationalist work of the French and other Trotskyists in World War II who sought to recruit German soldiers and sailors (and were sent to the concentration camps and executed by the Nazis for doing so), just as they hailed the U.S. Trotskyists who were jailed for their courageous opposition to the inter-imperialist slaughter. The PRF comrades had written that the claim by Nelson,³ that there was "little inspiration in the sordid history of French Trotskyism," had an element of truth but was one-sided and an example of national narrowness. The LTF majority rushed to demonstrate its allegiance to the I.S., incredibly claiming that only a couple of Frenchmen were actually involved in the internationalist work under Nazi occupation.

The charge of capitulation to French chauvinism directed against comrades from a former colony is particularly despicable coming from the French section of the ICL, whose leaders as late as 1992 refused to acknowledge that Algeria had militarily won the war of independence against France. The LTF leaders were rightly condemned by the second international conference of the ICL in that year for their position capitulating to diehard French colonialists who refused to admit defeat....

In fact, there is a striking continuity between the LTF's contemptible policies and functioning then and now, with the difference that today its policies are initiated, backed and enforced by the international leadership of the ICL.

At the beginning of the faction fight, another I.S. delegate, Adam, sent back to the LTF to bring it to heel, declared in a presentation that the goal of the majority would be to "humiliate" and "demoralize" the members of the minority. In their 26 December note to the I.S., the PRF comrades wrote that such tactics would only lead to

³ [Al Nelson, at that time a top SL/ICL leader.]

"pronounced demoralization of the members by inculcating them with cynicism." In response, international secretary Parks explicitly *endorsed* the policy of "humiliation," claiming that this would have been Lenin's policy. When a few days later Adam again declared the goal of humiliating the PRF (which *Le Bolchévik* now shamelessly repeats in print), a minority faction member told him heatedly that it was shameful to direct such remarks at comrades from a semi-colonial country. He should think, she added, about what it would mean for members of the SL/U.S. to say they intended to "humiliate" black comrades.

As for Parks' defense of this disgusting tactic, Lenin never engaged in such demeaning demagoguery toward communists from subject peoples. It was the Russifier *Stalin* who sought to belittle and humiliate opposition comrades of non-Russian origins. For this Stalin was roundly condemned by Lenin, in his last battle before he was fatally stricken. The Bolshevik leader insisted that proletarian class solidarity required profound thoughtfulness and sensitivity on such matters, and denounced Stalin for "carelessly fling[ing] about accusations of 'nationalist-socialism'." Lenin warned against the "violation of this equality, if only through negligence or jest" (from "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomization'" [December 1922]). Lenin's warning holds with full force today: those who carelessly fling about accusations of nationalism against internationalist communists from oppressed countries, those who talk cynically of "humiliating" and "demoralizing" such comrades, are *incapable* of leading international socialist revolution. On the contrary, they are reflecting the prejudices of, and making their peace with, "their own" bourgeoisies.

We have been measured in responding to the insults bandied about by the ICL leaders, but this endless repetition of chauvinist epithets is clearly no slip. It is part of their new politics.

Confessions and Revisions

In the recent faction fight in the French section, the majority, on instructions from the I.S., put up a bizarre photo montage in the LTF office consisting of pictures of Stalin, Castro, [and IG members] Norden and Negrete. This device is a classic example of the *amalgam*, equating the fight for authentic Trotskyism being waged by the comrades of the Permanent Revolution Faction with Stalinism. The majority found this so "amusing" that when comrades of the PRF were assigned to work in a particular room doing huge translations – deliberately to keep them so busy that they could not write more internal documents, or even read the documents attacking them, many of which they were never given copies of – the displays multiplied and appeared over their workplace. (Later the majority added photos of Algerian FLN leaders Boumedienne and Ben Bella.) When the PRF comrades pointed out that the majority was only demeaning itself, that it was adopting methods reminiscent of Maoism, and asked when they would start using dunce caps, the next day dunce caps appeared on the displays. Meanwhile, at meetings the majority would chant in chorus demanding "*des aveux, des aveux*" (confessions, confessions). This is quite a statement in a country where everyone on the left is familiar with the book by Arthur London on the 1948 Stalinist show trial of Rudolf Slansky in Czechoslovakia titled *L'Aveu* (The Confession). ■



Carnival Corporation chairman Mickey Arison together with Donald Trump at Miami Heat game in September 2016. Arison is also the owner of the Heat.

Cruise Workers...

continued from page 6

states like Bermuda and the Bahamas to protect seafarers against billionaire ship-owners like Arison in Florida! The only island in the Caribbean to offer safe haven to a passenger ship in distress (MS *Braemar*) was Cuba, a country frequently pilloried, along with China, by the anti-communist ITF. And on March 19, the ITF sent a joint letter with the International Chamber of Shipping (representing the owners) calling to “to keep supply chains open and maritime trade and transport moving,” and to that end, “emergency health protocols” should be “treated with pragmatism and understanding” – i.e., ignored.

Without unions to represent ships’ crews directly, they have no collective power. On union ships there are regular meetings at sea to decide on health and safety, working conditions, food and wage beefs. FOC ships, on the other hand, often break environmental laws like dumping over the side oil from the bilges, garbage and various loose materials. Most workers on the cruise ships live in cramped quarters with four bunks, and in smaller ships up to 12 bunks in a single bay on the B deck below the waterline. Most seafarers come from developing countries and are highly exploited wage slaves. An able-bodied (AB) seaman under ITF contract earns a base salary of \$1,100 a month.

By comparison the Sailors Union of the Pacific (SUP) AB earns \$4,174 a month, plus overtime. One of the key demands from community groups which are supporting the cruise crews, along with those related to paramount health issues, is for Carnival to continue to pay its workers through the pandemic and repatriate them to their home country. Maritime unions should support such demands and go further to initiate an organizing drive on FOC vessels, *demanding that U.S. union wage scales apply to all ships in*

U.S. ports. Crews that are ready to unionize must be able to count on longshore workers for solidarity actions. No space for “America Firsters” here.

In short, this pandemic offers the organized working class the opportunity to change this one-sided class war, to build a class-struggle leadership in the trade unions with an internationalist, socialist perspective. The coronavirus pandemic exposes the sheer inability of capitalism to deal with this deadly threat in a scientific, humane, egalitarian and centralized manner. COVID-19 increasingly strikes the most vulnerable, i.e. the poor, the elderly, the sick, overwhelmingly the working class and oppressed minorities.

What’s needed is a *socialized medical system* eliminating the profit motive, providing *free health care for all*. This means expropriating all private hospitals, clinics and pharmaceutical companies (including research and development), and instituting workers control led by qualified medical personnel in all facilities. Joining together with medical workers from China and Cuba to Europe and Latin America, what’s required to combat COVID-19 is an internationally coordinated, scientifically based effort to contain, mitigate and suppress the contagion by testing, contact tracking and treatment, while developing medicines and a vaccine, not Trump’s snake oil prescriptions. Amid the capitalist chaos today, thousands are dying.

The U.S. stands alone in the industrialized world without a national health system. Both Trump and Biden oppose national health insurance, much less socialized health care. But a real response to the crisis must deal with the economic devastation as well. The *coronavirus depression* has already begun, with 22 million new unemployment claims and over 30 million left jobless in the space of one month. Class-conscious workers should take up demands for a *shorter workweek with no loss in pay* (“30 for 40”) and *drastically increasing the minimum wage* (\$25 per hour or higher), whatever it takes to provide jobs for all and end mass poverty.

That, of course, points to the need for a socialized planned economy which can only come about through *international socialist revolution*. That is counterposed from top to bottom to the phony “political revolution” of Bernie Sanders and his reformist cheerleaders, which ends up backing Joe Biden, who wants to mobilize the military to lock down the country and to prepare for war on China. The answer is not to replace capitalist Republicans with capitalist Democrats – or to organize a new populist capitalist party – but to undertake the difficult but urgent task of building an *internationalist, revolution-*

ary workers party fighting for a *workers government*.

Trump wants to bail out the cruise industry. Hell no! The cutthroat shipping bosses paying poverty wages while spreading coronavirus around the world should be expropriated, lock, stock and barrel, without a dime of compensation, along with the banks who finance them, the hotel chains and the rest. Instead, the economy should be geared to fulfill social needs for all. Passenger ships could be converted to floating hostels to serve the homeless who are now living on the streets, under bridges and highway overpasses and in subways.

Of course, to achieve this revolution would require replacing the moribund leadership of the trade-union movement with class-struggle leadership, something we have not seen in many decades in this country. As Rosa Luxemburg, revolutionary socialist leader of the German workers during the carnage of WWI, stated a century ago, in 1916: “‘Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.’” She spoke these prescient words before being assassinated in January 1919 by the social-democratic government of Ebert and Scheidemann who were hell-bent to stop the German workers revolution.

Socialism or barbarism. Right now we are staring the barbarism in the face, as crews on death ships⁵ are condemned to circle endlessly at sea as disease spreads on board, as dozens of refrigerated trailers line up at hospitals in New York City to serve as temporary morgues. We are in the middle of a plague, like the 1918 influenza pandemic that infected 500 million people and left 50 million dead. The answer, then and now, is revolutionary struggle to combat the social plagues that the coronavirus feeds off. To overthrow the capitalist system of death and destruction, we need to put the working class at the helm. ■

Jack Heyman, a retired longshoreman, was a maritime worker for 40 years, first as a seaman in the National Maritime Union where he was an organizer for the class-struggle

⁵ *The Death Ship* is the title of a book by the mysterious German leftist author B. Traven, author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, about merchant seamen who lack citizenship papers and can’t find legal residence or employment anywhere, like millions of undocumented immigrants today.



Typical crew quarters on cruise ships, with four bunks in tiny space.



The *Grand Princess* flying the “flag of convenience” of Bermuda, where the ship is registered.

opposition group the Militant-Solidarity Caucus and received a commendation for saving the life of a Filipino-American seaman on a burning barge in New York harbor. Later he became an ILWU longshoreman in Oakland, CA. Contact him at: jackheyman@comcast.net.

Jan Norden is the editor of The Internationalist and a leading member of the Internationalist Group.

League for the Fourth International

LFI, Box 3321, Church Street Station, New York, NY 10008, U.S.A. E-mail: internationalistgroup@msn.com

Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil

Brazil: write to Caixa Postal 084027, CEP 27251-740, Volta Redonda, RJ, Brazil

Rio de Janeiro: write to Caixa Postal 3982, CEP 20001-974, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
E-mail: lqb1996@yahoo.com.br

Internationalistische Gruppe/Deutschland

Germany: write to Postfach 80 97 21, 21007 Hamburg, Germany
E-mail: permanenterevolution@posteo.de

Nucleo Internazionalista d'Italia

Italy: write to Anna Chiaraluce, Casella Postale N. 6, 06070 Ellera Umbra (PG), Italy
E-mail: it_internazionalista@yahoo.com

Grupo Internacionalista/México

México: write to Apartado Postal 12-201, Admón. Postal Obrero Mundial, CP 03001, México D.F., México
E-mail: grupointernacionalista@yahoo.com.mx
Tel. Mexico City: 55-3154-7361; Guadalajara: 33-1752-6643; Oaxaca: 951-185-6815

Internationalist Group/U.S.

Internationalist Group, Box 3321, Church Street Station, New York, NY 10008, U.S.A.
E-mail: internationalistgroup@msn.com
New York Tel. (212) 460-0983 Fax: (212) 614-8711
Los Angeles Tel. (323) 984-8590
New England Tel. (617) 213-5010
Pacific Northwest Tel. (503) 303-8278



Housekeeping worker on a cruise ship. Crews work seven days a week.

Hecatombe...

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protestas, paros y huelgas. Los trabajadores en las plantas de empackado de carne se encuentran entre los que mayores riesgos enfrentan, con miles concentrados en pequeñas áreas, saturadas de líquidos, a temperaturas cercanas a los cero grados centígrados. Ayer, Smithfield Foods se vio obligada a cerrar su planta de carne porcina en Sioux Falls, Dakota del Sur, en donde 293 de los 3,700 empleados dieron positivo al coronavirus, lo que representa el 40 por ciento de los casos en el estado (*Newsweek*, 12 de abril).

Los trabajadores de la industria de la carne, en su inmensa mayoría negros, hispanos e inmigrantes, han estado también en la primera línea de las movilizaciones.¹ El 23 de marzo, decenas de trabajadores en la planta avícola no sindicalizada de Perdue Farms en Kathleen, Georgia, pararon labores para protestar en contra de condiciones de trabajo inseguras. El 1º de abril, cerca de mil trabajadores de la planta cárnica JBS en Greeley, Colorado, miembros del United Food and Commercial Workers Union [UFCW – Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Alimenticia y Comercial], hicieron un paro de labores después de que diez trabajadores dieron positivo en pruebas del COVID-19.

Uno de los principales nodos de concentración del COVID-19 en el país ha sido Albany, en el estado de Georgia. Una cuestión clave es que “La ciudad está rodeada de media docena de plantas de empackado de carne, en las que miles de trabajadores están empleados” (*Payday Report*, 10 de abril). En Tyson’s Food en la cercana población de Camilla, Georgia, el Wholesale y Department Store Union (RWDSU – Sindicato de Trabajadores de Tiendas al Menudeo y Departamentales) informó que dos de sus miembros ya habían muerto. Pero, aunque un comunicado de prensa del RWDSU declaraba que “La tardía respuesta al COVID-19 de la industria avícola está matando a los trabajadores esenciales de Estados Unidos”, el sindicato no convocó ninguna movilización.

Los almacenes de Amazon, el gigante del comercio y distribución por internet, han sido un punto focal de las protestas. La compañía, que es rabiosamente antisindical, ha conseguido, hasta el momento, aplastar las campañas de sindicalización en Estados Unidos (véase nuestro artículo “Unionize Amazon and Whole Foods!” en *The Internationalist* No. 55, invierno de 2019). Actualmente, la compañía está amasando miles de millones de dólares, toda vez que más y más compradores están encerrados en sus casas comprando en línea. El 18 de marzo, los trabajadores cerraron un almacén en Queens, Nueva York, para exigir que la producción sea detenida para la plena sanitización de las instalaciones.

Más tarde, el 30 de marzo, trabajadores del almacén de Amazon en Staten Island, Nueva York, pararon labores para exigir un pago extra por la peligrosidad de sus labores, la sanitización de las instalaciones y la dotación de equipo de protección después de que se supo que la compañía había guardado silencio sobre casos de COVID-19 en

dichas instalaciones. Amazon contraatacó esa noche con el despido de Chris Smalls, un supervisor, que había iniciado la protesta. Tras una amplia cobertura mediática, los jefes de Amazon, incluido su dueño, Jeff Bezos, el hombre más rico del mundo, se reunieron para diseñar una estrategia para lidiar con las protestas y los informes de que trabajadores en 14 o más instalaciones de Amazon se han infectado.

Tras la reunión, el consejero legal en jefe envió un memorándum en el que se refería a Smalls, que es negro, diciendo que “no es inteligente ni se expresa bien”, como parte de una racista campaña de relaciones públicas para calumniarlo y convertirlo en “el rostro de todo el movimiento por la sindicalización”. Al día siguiente, el 31 de marzo, empleados alrededor del país de los almacenes Whole Foods, propiedad de Amazon, realizaron una falta médica de carácter colectivo para exigir una licencia con goce de sueldo para los trabajadores en cuarentena, pago extra por trabajo peligroso y cobertura médica para los trabajadores a tiempo parcial y estacionales. Para el 6 de abril, los manifestantes estaban de vuelta afuera de la planta de Staten Island, coreando “¡Ciérrenla! ¡Límpienla!”

Ha habido protestas similares en instalaciones de Amazon en Chicago y Detroit. La compañía, que es ya el segundo mayor empleador privado de EE.UU., ha anunciado planes para contratar a otros 100 mil trabajadores. Entretanto, Instacart, la app de entrega a domicilio de comestibles y abarrotes dice que planea enganchar a otros 300 mil “contratistas”, una denominación que la empresa y otros patrones de la “economía gig” utilizan para negar los derechos de sus trabajadores. El 30 de marzo, trabajadores de Instacart realizaron protestas para exigir que la compañía pagara sus equipos de protección personal, pago extra por riesgo, y pago para los trabajadores que no pueden laborar por estar afectados por el COVID-19.

En la cadena de supermercados Trader Joe’s, los trabajadores han estado luchando por la formación de un sindicato y en protesta en contra de condiciones laborales inseguras. La respuesta de los patrones, en medio de la pandemia, ha consistido en una intensa campaña antisindical, en la que los gerentes aleccionan a los “socios de sus equipos” sobre los “peligros” de la sindicalización. En Louisville, Kentucky, un empleado de la compañía, Kris King, formó una página de Facebook para que los trabajadores discutieran la respuesta de la compañía a la crisis del coronavirus. El 28 de marzo, la compañía despidió a King, diciendo que “No operamos permitiendo que los socios de los equipos hablen entre sí” (*New York Times*, 2 de abril).

Éstos son apenas unos pocos ejemplos de casos en los que los trabajadores se han visto obligados a movilizarse para exigir condiciones seguras de trabajo frente a una amenaza directa a sus vidas. Hay muchos otros:

- El 20 de marzo, los locales 10 y 34 del International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU – sindicato de estibadores de la Costa del Pacífico) en Oakland, California, realizaron una protesta y amenazaron con un paro para exigir que las instalaciones sean sanitizadas diariamente por profesionales. Exigieron también protección para la tripulación del crucero contaminado *Grand Princess* que ha sido sometido a cuarentena en la bahía.
- El 24 de marzo, trabajadores represen-

tados por la International Association of Machinists (IAM – sindicato de metalúrgicos) en el astillero Bath Iron Works en Maine realizaron un paro de labores para exigir el cierre del astillero, propiedad de General Dynamics, durante la crisis del COVID-19, y que durante este tiempo los trabajadores sigan recibiendo su paga.

- El 25 de marzo, los trabajadores de sanidad, en su mayoría negros, de Pittsburgh, Pensilvania, miembros de Local 249 del sindicato de los Teamsters (IBT), realizaron una huelga de dos horas y un mitin, usando camiones para bloquear las entradas de la Oficina de Servicios Ambientales para exigir que fueran dotados de mascarillas de protección, mejores guantes, más botas de trabajo y pago extra por trabajo de riesgo y para cubrir los gastos médicos en caso de enfermarse a causa del virus.
- El 30 de marzo, trabajadores de General Electric representados por el International Union of Electrical Workers-Communication Workers of America (IUE-CWA) protestaron frente al cuartel general de la compañía en Boston, para exigir mejor equipo de protección en contra del coronavirus y que la compañía recontrate a trabajadores despedidos para manufacturar los ventiladores tan urgentemente necesarios para tratar a los pacientes con COVID-19
- El 6 de abril, en Chicago, un centenar de trabajadores de dos fábricas suburbanas suspendieron labores después de que algunos de sus compañeros se infectaran; en una fábrica que prepara postres mexicanos, el UFCW exigió que la compañía pague a los trabajadores en cuarentena voluntaria durante 14 días, además de que les provea un pago extra por labores riesgosas de 2 dólares la hora para quienes sigan trabajando.
- El 7 de abril, “trabajadores gig [freelance]” de la app Shipt, propiedad de Target, pararon labores para exigir equipo de protección personal, licencias médicas con goce de sueldo, pago extra por labores peligrosas y para protestar en contra de los recortes salariales impuestos durante la pandemia. Shipt es tristemente célebre por el abuso que realiza en contra de sus trabajadores y por la “desactivación” (despido) de quienquiera que exprese la menor crítica, tanto de manera virtual como real, de sus políticas.

Sindicalismo de lucha de clases vs. burocracia sindical vendida

La prensa patronal sabe bien que los “trabajadores esenciales” están en una posición potencialmente muy fuerte en la crisis actual. El *Bloomberg Business Week* (7 de abril) tituló uno de sus artículos: “El coronavirus señala el mejor y el peor momento para ir a huelga” y “Cuando trabajar implica riesgo de muerte, se prepara un contragolpe”. Es probable que en las postrimerías de la crisis haya una efervescencia de organización sindical. Sin embargo, la dirección actual del movimiento obrero norteamericano es incapaz de imponer las demandas obreras a favor de condiciones laborales seguras. Esto exige algo muy distinto: *sindicalismo de lucha clasista*.

Estas luchas muestran el choque irreconciliable entre los intereses de la clase

obrero y los de los patrones, cuya única preocupación con respecto a los trabajadores es que son la fuente de ganancias mediante la explotación de su trabajo. Incluso en tiempos “normales”, más de 5 mil trabajadores mueren en el trabajo cada año en EE.UU.; decenas de miles más mueren cada año de enfermedades relacionadas con el trabajo. Los efectos de la actual crisis sanitaria son considerablemente multiplicados por el capitalismo, toda vez que la pandemia ha desatado lo que muy probablemente será una larga depresión económica, con decenas de millones de trabajadores despedidos y depauperados.

Lo que puede y debe surgir de esta crisis es un nuevo y vigoroso movimiento obrero. Pero la continuación del viejo “sindicalismo de negocio”, como el que ha sido practicado por la burocracia sindical de la AFL-CIO a lo largo de varias décadas, sólo lleva a un callejón sin salida. Son precisamente esas políticas las que han llevado a la destrucción masiva de los sindicatos, de modo que hoy apenas el 10 por ciento de los trabajadores están sindicalizados, y tan sólo el 6 por ciento entre los trabajadores del sector privado. Los falsos dirigentes sindicales buscan una engañosa “asociación” con los patrones, que han librado una implacable guerra de clases en contra de la clase obrera y los oprimidos desde hace décadas, y que siguen haciéndolo hoy en medio de la crisis del coronavirus.

Los trabajadores han sido paralizados por la subordinación de las cúpulas sindicales al capitalista Partido Demócrata, y su obediencia a las leyes e instituciones antiobreras del gobierno patronal, incluida la Junta Nacional de Relaciones Laborales (NLRB). La lealtad de los burócratas al orden capitalista se ve ejemplificada por la bienvenida que dan a policías, guardias de seguridad y carceleros –el brazo armado de la clase dominante– al movimiento obrero, mientras se esconden detrás de las leyes y las cláusulas contractuales que proscriben las huelgas. Los sindicalistas combativos dicen: *¡Para nada! ¡Fuera policías de cualquier tipo de los sindicatos! ¡Abajo las leyes rompesindicatos de la patronal!*

Los trabajadores tienen el poder para ganar. ¡Necesitamos una dirección armada con el programa necesario para usarlo! La podrida burocracia sindical en la cúpula de estas organizaciones obreras mina su poder al encadenarlas a los patrones. Los escándalos de corrupción que han sacudido al UAW no se reducen al enriquecimiento individual, sino que son la expresión personalizada de la política de *colaboración de clases*. Y así como los burócratas vendidos son incapaces de poner alto al cierre de plantas, no pueden tampoco proteger la salud y la seguridad de los trabajadores. *Sin embargo, son los trabajadores, los que producen los bienes y servicios vitales, quienes constituyen el sindicato.*

Lo que se necesita urgentemente es un movimiento obrero que se base en el programa de la *lucha clasista*, de que la clase obrera movilice su propio poder social. El economicista “sindicalismo de las bases” propugnado por algunas corrientes de izquierda como una supuesta alternativa a la empedernida burocracia sindical evita deliberadamente las cuestiones políticas y sociales más acuciosas y evade la necesidad de una dirección clasista basada en un programa para ganar la guerra de clases. En una grave crisis de la sociedad capitalista como la actual, tal política es aún más desastrosa.

¹ La industria del empackado de carne ha sido testigo de enormes batallas por la sindicalización en las que los trabajadores afroamericanos, latinos y nativos americanos se han unido en la lucha. Véase “North Carolina Labor Revolt” en *The Internationalist*, No. 25, enero-febrero de 2007.



Trabajadoras en planta avícola. La gran mayoría de trabajadores de las empacadoras son latinos, negros e inmigrantes.

Decenas de millones de trabajadores de la multirracial clase obrera –en muchos lugares, compuesta principalmente de trabajadores latinos, afroamericanos e inmigrantes, mal pagados, desprotegidos y con pocas prestaciones– necesitan urgentemente organizarse en sindicatos simplemente para defender sus intereses, y sus vidas. Para hacerlo, el movimiento obrero debe luchar no sólo por la defensa de estrechos intereses gremiales, sino para defender la causa de todos los oprimidos.

Algunos de los trabajadores más esenciales hoy en día son los trabajadores agrícolas inmigrantes indocumentados, sin cuyo agotador trabajo el país no podría alimentarse. Sin embargo, aunque el Departamento de Seguridad de la Patria (Homeland Security) los declara trabajadores esenciales, en cualquier momento pueden ser arrestados y deportados por la policía migratoria del ICE. Un movimiento obrero combativo debe exigir *plenos derechos de ciudadanía para todos los inmigrantes*. Además, *movilizaría el poder obrero para poner alto a las redadas y deportaciones y para cerrar los centros de detención* que son un caldo de cultivo para la infección del COVID-19.

Hoy, muchos trabajadores afroamericanos, latinos y asiáticos en las primeras líneas de la batalla en contra del coronavirus carecen de seguro médico. Aunque los reformistas hacen eco de la exigencia de “Medicare para todos” de Bernie Sanders y de los “progresistas” del Partido Demócrata, la verdad es que esta medida no sería más que un curita. Negros y latinos tienen con frecuencia condiciones médicas subyacentes, enfrentan discriminación en el racista sistema médico capitalista y su tasa de mortalidad por el virus es el doble de la de los blancos. Un movimiento obrero de lucha clasista debe propugnar la *medicina socializada*, para otorgar *atención médica gratuita y de alta calidad para todos*.

Lo que se necesita urgentemente es un movimiento obrero basado en los viejos principios de *clase contra clase*, de la movilización proletaria de su propio poder social, en tanto productores “esenciales” de la riqueza que hace que esta sociedad funcione. Esto significa un movimiento sindical de lucha clasista que combata toda forma de opresión social, que se coloque en la primera línea de la lucha contra el racismo, la lucha por plena igualdad de mujeres, gays, lesbianas y personas transgénero, y que unifique estas batallas en una lucha para acabar con el sistema capitalista que produce muerte y destrucción para todos. Significa una lucha para conformar una dirección *revolucionaria*.

El capitalismo nos está matando. ¡Luchar por una revolución socialista!

El único idioma que comprenden los capitalistas y sus políticos de los partidos Demócrata y Republicano es el del poder. Les preocupa que los “trabajadores esenciales” tengan un poder potencial, pero los patrones confían en su capacidad de engatusar e intimidar a quienes hacen que a duras penas les alcance el dinero y que ahora están enfrentados con una amenaza potencialmente mortal. Quienes se proponen organizar a los superexplotados “esclavos asalariados”, como los llamó Karl Marx, debemos tener bien claro que los paros que ha habido recientemente son todavía pequeños y tentativos. Se requiere de un poder real para respaldarlos.

Por doquier, la burocracia sindical pro capitalista ha representado un obstáculo. Incluso cuando sindicatos como el automotriz (UAW) y los de trabajadores de la industria alimenticia y de los comercios al menudeo (UFCW y RWDSU) se han movilizado, lo han hecho de manera esporádica, en el mejor de los casos, además de que la iniciativa ha venido de las bases. Ahí donde han hecho desanimados simulacros de sindicalización –en gigantes como Walmart, Amazon o cadenas de comida rápida– ni siquiera han intentado formar verdaderos sindicatos, sino tan sólo establecer endeble centros de trabajadores y con frecuencia sin apenas tratar de movilizar a los trabajadores de la empresa. ¿Por qué? Los burócratas sindicales no quieren arriesgar su política de ser “socios” de los patrones (y el patrimonio inmobiliario sindical) al desafiar las leyes antiobreras que paralizan a los sindicatos.

Para organizar a los trabajadores de una empresa tan ferozmente antisindical como Amazon, la clave consiste en aplicar el enorme poder de sindicatos como el de los Teamsters. Y esto no se logrará jugando según las reglas de la patronal. Es por esto por lo que iniciativas de militantes clasistas en industrias sindicalizadas son excepcionalmente importantes en la actualidad y pueden abrir la vía para una campaña a gran escala para sindicalizar a los trabajadores no sindicalizados. En la planta de UPS en Chelmsford, Massachusetts, después de que el presidente del Local 25 de los Teamsters escribiera una carta a los jefes de la compañía el 27 de marzo para protestar por la falta de protección para los trabajadores, un militante del sindicato, Mike Gath, publicó un volante titulado “Si no hay seguridad, ¡paro laboral!” El volante llamaba a la conformación de un “comité independiente de salud y seguridad exclusivamente obrero, de delegados sindicales

y otros trabajadores de Chelmsford” para asegurar el cumplimiento por parte de la compañía. Concluía así:

“Si no hay seguridad, vamos al paro laboral. Si para el lunes no hay una limpieza y desinfección de las instalaciones que sea meticulosa y realizada por una instancia independiente, no debe realizarse ningún trabajo en ellas.

“Poder sindical, poder obrero: es cuestión de vida o muerte para nosotros ahora”.

Un segundo volante, publicado en redes sociales el 3 de abril, reiteraba estas exigencias y añadía: “Debemos recibir un pago extra por trabajo riesgoso, que debe equivaler a una jornada doble. No nos sacrificaremos por sus ganancias. No permitamos que la compañía demore hasta que alguien muera en el trabajo”.

Al enfatizar que la lucha no se limita a un solo almacén o industria, el 6 de abril Gath y partidarios del Internationalist Group se sumaron a una caravana de conductores de taxi de aplicación en Boston, declarando su solidaridad y exigiendo “pago de mil dólares a la semana para todos los choferes de taxi, Uber y Lyft”. Ese día más tarde, se informó que había muerto por COVID-19 un trabajador del enorme nudo internacional Worldport de UPS en Louisville, Kentucky, donde trabajan unos 10 mil trabajadores, que procesan hasta 416 mil paquetes por hora. El 10 de abril, Gath publicó en línea:

“Como he escrito antes, cada día que pasa muestra que ¡necesitamos un paro nacional por la salud y la seguridad!

“Necesitamos también que todo el sindicato escuche esto y lo emprenda. Una verdadera lucha sobre esta cuestión ahora en UPS sería crucial también para abrir la vía para sindicalizar a los compañeros de FedEx, Amazon, Whole Foods, etc....

“¡Pago extra por riesgo ahora!

“Si no hay seguridad, ¡no trabajamos!

“¡Necesitamos un paro nacional por la salud y la seguridad en UPS!”

Una perspectiva de lucha fue la que presentaron nuestros compañeros y compañeras de Class Struggle Workers – Portland en su llamado del 18 de marzo a realizar acciones obreras en la crisis del coronavirus. Presentaron una serie de reivindicaciones para exigir que los trabajadores fueran dotados con el equipo de protección que

ellos mismos determinarían; a favor de la formación de comités de salud y seguridad que representaran a trabajadores tanto sindicalizados como no sindicalizados; pago pleno para todos los que no pueden trabajar debido al virus; a favor de la ocupación de propiedades vacías para proveer vivienda para los sin techo; a favor de liberar a los detenidos en los campos de concentración del ICE. El llamado concluye:

“Un movimiento obrero combativo de masas con una dirección clasista establecería comisiones obreras en los centros de trabajo para decidir e implementar las medidas necesarias, incluido el cierre ahí donde sea necesario, sin detener los salarios de los trabajadores, o bien, la continuación del trabajo productivo con la protección necesaria.

“A la larga, será necesaria una economía planificada capaz de redirigir la producción y distribución del equipo médico, de seguridad y de necesidades básicas, organizando centros de trabajo con la prioridad en la seguridad de los trabajadores, para pelear de forma efectiva en contra de la pandemia. Esto implica luchar para poner fin al sistema capitalista y la concomitante anarquía en la producción por el lucro privado, la incompetencia, el racismo y la explotación, y así luchar para establecer un gobierno obrero.

“Con las vidas y el sustento de tantos trabajadores y oprimidos al filo de la navaja, la única salida es la lucha de clases.”

Esta crisis ha abierto los ojos a muchas personas que normalmente no se preocupaban por la procedencia de los bienes y servicios que consumen. En estos tiempos desesperados, debe quedar claro que el sistema capitalista mismo constituye un peligro inminente para las vidas de los trabajadores, los pobres, y para la humanidad en su conjunto (véase nuestro artículo “Coronavirus y capitalismo”, *The Internationalist*, 29 de marzo). Como dice la declaración del CSWP: “Mientras se desarrolla la pandemia, la acuciante necesidad de un partido obrero revolucionario internacional no podría ser más clara”. Un partido tal debe estar en la vanguardia de la lucha obrera para destruir el poder estatal en manos de los gobernantes capitalistas en una lucha por la revolución socialista internacional. ■

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**¡Por un sindicalismo de lucha clasista! ¡Sindicalizar a los no sindicalizados!
Si no hay seguridad, ¡paro laboral!**

En la hecatombe de la pandemia de COVID-19, los trabajadores luchan por su salud y seguridad

13 de ABRIL – La lucha de clases no cesa en medio de un desastre “natural”. Si acaso, se intensifica. En contra de lo que sostiene la retórica engañosamente tranquilizante e hipócrita de los políticos, de que “estamos juntos todos en esto,” las crudas realidades de vida o muerte dejan al descubierto los intereses fundamentalmente opuestos de los explotadores y los explotados, al menos para quienes se atreven a verlos. Por su parte, los gobernantes capitalistas nunca dejan que “se desperdicie una buena crisis”. Por esto la clase obrera y los oprimidos necesitan –con aún mayor intensidad en medio de tiempos de desesperación y tragedia– una dirección revolucionaria.

Mientras que la mortífera pandemia de coronavirus se extiende a lo largo y ancho de Estados Unidos, alrededor del 95 por ciento de la población se encuentra bajo las órdenes de “quedarse en casa” dictadas por gobiernos estatales y municipales. Medidas efectivas de cuarentena son clave para combatir la crisis de salud pública del COVID-19, que ya ha dejado más de 20 mil muertes en EE.UU. y unas 110 mil a escala mundial, aunque las cifras reales son ciertamente mucho mayores. Al mismo tiempo, millones de trabajadores siguen yendo a laborar, para realizar tareas vitales mientras que enfrentan graves riesgos para su salud y sus vidas.

Esto incluye, en primer lugar, a enfermeras, médicos, camilleros y otros trabajadores del sector salud en el frente de batalla, atendiendo heroicamente a los enfermos, con frecuencia en instalaciones médicas



¡Defendamos a los trabajadores de la industria de carne! Caravana protesta condiciones peligrosas en empacadora en Sioux Falls, Dakota del Sur, el 9 de abril. Cientos de trabajadores de la planta han contraído COVID-19.

espantosamente saturadas. En Nueva York, en estos momentos epicentro del brote en Estados Unidos, ha habido protestas en varios hospitales por la falta del indispensable

equipo de protección personal (EPP). En muchos casos, las administraciones hospitalarias han impuesto acciones disciplinarias, e incluso han despedido, a quienes han levantado la voz en contra del criminal desprecio por las vidas de sus empleados.

Entretanto, las condiciones frecuentemente horribles que prevalecen en los asilos de ancianos, refugios e instalaciones similares para pacientes altamente vulnerables se combinan con el abierto desprecio por la salud y las condiciones laborales de los trabajadores.

Además, los trabajadores de primera línea incluyen a millones en otros gremios –entre ellos, los trabajadores del transporte público, los trabajadores postales y de paquetería, así como los de supermercados y tiendas, farmacias, restaurantes, servicios de limpieza, etc.– cuya labor es, de hecho, esencial para proveer a quienes se quedan en casa con el avituallamiento esencial. En Nueva York, cuatro de cada cinco trabajadores de primera línea son afroamericanos, hispanos y asiáticos, de los cuales casi la mitad nacieron en otro país, y con frecuencia reciben salarios de hambre, mientras que quienes pueden trabajar desde la casa son predominantemente de clase media y blancos.

Hemos señalado que, en algunos lugares, magnates inmobiliarios con conexiones políticas lograron inicialmente que la industria de la construcción fuera declarada como “esencial”, poniendo así en peligro las vidas de los trabajadores para incrementar sus ganancias especulativas. Esto ocasionó protestas, y el 6 de abril más de 10 mil miembros del sindicato de carpinteros en Massachusetts se rehusaron a presentarse a trabajar en proyectos nuevos de vivienda e infraestructura, para protestar por las condiciones insalubres que prevalecen. Al menos dos decenas de afiliados sindicales han dado positivo en pruebas de coronavirus; cientos tienen síntomas y se encuentran en cuarentena voluntaria. El *Engineering News Record* (6 de abril) informaba:

“El Consejo Distrital 35 del International Union of Painters and Allied Trades [IUPAT – Sindicato Internacional de Pintores y Oficios Afines] seguirá la iniciativa, toda vez que el sindicato ha emitido la orden de quedarse en casa a sus miles de miembros, que entrará en efecto al concluir la jornada laboral del 6 de abril.

“Esta decisión se da pocos días después de que el Consejo de Gremios de la Construcción de Massachusetts, que representa a 75 mil sindicalistas que van desde carpinteros y pintores hasta herreros y peones, urgiera al gobernador Charles Baker a suspender todas las labores, excepto las de emergencia, por lo que resta del mes de abril”.

En la industria automotriz, cuando los trabajadores llamaron a cerrar la industria, Fiat Chrysler, Ford y General Motors, así como los dirigentes del United Auto Workers (UAW – Sindicato de Trabajadores Automotrices) habían llegado a un acuerdo para un “cierre parcial rotatorio de plantas”. Pero horas más tarde, después de que Fiat Chrysler informó que otro de sus empleados en la planta de Sterling Heights, Michigan, había dado positivo al coronavirus, los trabajadores del primer turno del 18 de marzo se rehusaron a entrar. Huelgas similares se extendieron rápidamente en las plantas automotrices del área de Detroit, obligando a las gigantes automotrices a parar actividades. El 24 de marzo se anunció que dos trabajadores de Fiat Chrysler habían muerto.

Oleada de paros de “trabajadores esenciales” puestos en peligro por la patronal

Incluso en trabajos que son realmente esenciales para cubrir las necesidades básicas de la población, el desprecio criminal de los patrones por la salud y seguridad de los trabajadores ha producido extendidas

sigue en la página 22



Trabajadores de la empresa “Pilgrim’s Pride” en Cold Spring, Minnesota, salieron en paro por las condiciones insalubres en la planta, el 28 de abril. Decenas de empacadoras han cerrado debido al contagio de coronavirus entre los trabajadores. En respuesta, Trump ha decretado la militarización de la industria para obligarles a trabajar arriesgando sus vidas.