

An Evil King Rules an Afflicted Land: Coronavirus and the Depression in America

April 26, 2020



This article was written for *L'Anticapitaliste, la revue*, the monthly journal of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) of France.

We in America live in what resembles some medieval fairy tale. An evil and maniacal king rules the plague stricken land. The wicked lords in the corrupt parliament rob the public coffers to enrich their cronies. The tribunes of the people, mostly venal and foolish, are alternately deceived or suborned by the King and the lords. Meanwhile many people are sick and many dying. The bodies pile up. The soothsayers blame it on the foreigners and plan pogroms. The mills have stopped; the inns and taverns have closed. Peasants rebel here and there but the plague prevents a general rebellion. Word has it the situation is the same in neighboring kingdoms all around.

That's a fairy tale of course. What's the reality? The United States now has nearly one million coronavirus cases and 50,000 deaths, more of both than any country in the world. We have an unemployment rate of 20 percent, the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The two together represent what is perhaps the greatest crisis in American history, an absolutely unprecedented event: a catastrophe. And it may only have just begun.

As the coronavirus has swept across the country bringing illness to hundreds of thousands and killing tens of thousands, Americans have been shocked by the failure of government, business, and the health system. As the number of sick mounted, there were not enough hospitals, not enough hospital beds, not enough ICUs, not enough ventilators. Hospital personnel have lacked gowns, masks, and respirators. As hospital workers fall sick or die there are not enough health workers to

replace them. Some seven thousand elderly died in private nursing homes. The disease is now rampant in prisons. It is rife in meat packing plants, with 725 cases at the Smithfield plant in South Dakota. Twenty-six U.S. Navy ships have crews with coronavirus, including 850 sick on the huge 5,000-crewmember *U.S.S. Roosevelt*. Everywhere essential workers—bus drivers, garbage collectors, grocery cashiers, delivery workers—became sick and many have died, and neither business nor the governments that regulate these companies acted quickly to save them.

And as the health crisis made it necessary to close businesses, a Second Great Depression has ensued. Twenty-six million lost their jobs in four months. Then the state unemployment services failed. Tens of thousands have found it impossible to get their unemployment payments. And now the state unemployment trust funds are going broke. In cities across the country lines of cars miles long wait to get a box of groceries from a volunteer food bank. One third of renters in the country could not pay their rent last month. Schools closed, but distant learning proved difficult because only some families had computers, so education has also broken down for many. The United States gives the impression of a failing state and society, one that cannot protect or help its people. Anxiety has gripped much of the society and some, either in hazardous jobs or with no jobs and income, have fallen into despair.

State, county, and city governments, which are no longer getting taxes from the closed businesses, find themselves in a fiscal crisis and they will soon be forced to lay off public employees. Yet so far the federal government has not provided aid to the states. Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell has suggested that states should file for bankruptcy, a procedure that would be devastating for state workers' pension plans.

There is now a widespread perception that the American government has putrefied, like the government's emergency stores of ventilators that did not work, defective test kits, and rotten masks. Americans have been shocked to learn that other countries, like Taiwan, South Korea, and Vietnam proved more effective than the United States in containing the virus and preventing its spread. Americans were once proud to shout, "We're number one." Now we're number one in coronavirus and economic collapse. The sense of governmental and business failure, still spreading with the virus across the country, must be having a significant impact on the American people's consciousness, though it is still too early to know what this means for the future.

Everywhere capitalism and America's conservative and corrupt political system have made it more difficult to fight the pandemic. In the United States, there is no national health care system and no national health insurance for all. There are federal health agencies, fifty state health departments, 900 health insurance companies, hundreds of pharmaceutical companies, more than 20,000 pharmacies, hundreds of hospital equipment manufacturers and supply companies. There are 6,000 hospitals, some for profit, some not-for-profit, some run by the government. Heads of regulatory agencies, usually former corporate executives, oversee the competition and the search for profits that dominate this vast industry. There is little coordination and consequently, there has been no unified response to the pandemic as the federal government provided only weak recommendations and state governors and hundreds of health corporations did whatever they wished, while individuals struggled with the multiple bureaucracies of the health system.

Trump: Guilty of Negligent Homicide

President Donald Trump's delays, misinformation, and wild ravings contradicting epidemiologists and physicians have contributed to the health disaster and now threaten to unleash a second wave of infection. After coronavirus cases had been identified in China and other countries, Trump failed to take action, with the exception of the limited travel ban on China on January 31. He said at the end of January, "We have it completely under control." In mid-February Trump said, "Looks like by

April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away.” Even after what was then thought to be the first coronavirus death in the United States on February 17, Trump continued to minimize the epidemic, saying on February 19, “I think the numbers are going to get progressively better as we go along.” He claimed falsely on February 26, “We’re going very substantially down, not up.” In early March he claimed that coronavirus would be much milder than the flu. And in April he continued to give misleading information about the disease, about ventilators, about treatments, and about the development of vaccines. For weeks Trump recommended contrary to medical evidence that hydroxychloroquine, a malaria treatment, could be used to treat Covid-19. Most recently Trump suggested an injection of disinfectant into the lungs, which would be fatal. Trump should be held responsible for manslaughter, for the tens of thousands of deaths that might have been prevented had it not been for his negligent homicide.

The pandemic was not a bolt out of the blue. U.S. intelligence agencies, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the out-going Obama administration, Trump’s own Department of Health and Human Services, and other government agencies had not only predicted that the country would experience a pandemic, they had practiced for it. A report on one pandemic practice described the mock response as “chaotic.” When the coronavirus became a pandemic, the American government was completely unprepared. Trump had cut the budgets of the CDC and of the National Institutes of Health. Most important, for 70 days Trump failed to take the kind of action that had been foreseen and advised: establishing social distancing policies, carrying out testing, and doing contact tracing. Having failed to stop the initial spread, mitigation came too late, leading New York City to become the international epicenter of the disease.

As the country fell to its knees, Trump’s administration through Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, Republican leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell and the Democratic Party leader of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, succeeded in getting the U.S. Congress to pass three relief measures totaling almost three trillion dollars offering loans and grants to businesses and hospitals, and payments to workers. The promise to help small businesses proved false as much of that money went to large, financially sound corporations and not to medium and small businesses. The government made the loans available through banks, which helped large companies with credit and connections while harming small, financially weak companies. There were also huge tax breaks for the rich in the relief packages.

The federal government’s assistance to workers will only tide them over for a few months. Most workers in addition to their unemployment checks are receiving a one-time payment of \$1,200, with an additional \$500 per child as well as \$600 each week until July 31. Many workers will not be eligible, especially undocumented workers who do not qualify for federal aid. The state of California is allocating \$75 million for the undocumented immigrant who pay \$3 billion in California state and local taxes every year.

The Situation of the Working Class

American workers have been affected by the coronavirus in quite different ways. It is estimated that about 29 percent of all American workers have been able to work from home; this includes many technical and professional employees, engineers, architects, professors and teachers. About 26 million workers or 20 percent of the American workforce has been laid off. Millions of essential workers continue to perform their duties often risking exposure to coronavirus from coworkers, the public, or passengers on public transportation.

Economic and racial inequality is also evident. A higher proportion of blacks and Latinos have become sick and died. In Chicago black people make 32 percent of the population, but they make up 72 percent of the coronavirus deaths. In New York both blacks and Latinos are dying at twice the

rate of whites. This is largely due to underlying conditions—high blood pressure, diabetes, and respiratory disease—but also to working in essential jobs as well as lack of health care and overcrowded housing.

Racism appears everywhere in this crisis. Asian Americans have experienced verbal abuse and violent attacks as the bearers of what Trump called the “Chinese virus.” Trump closed the border to asylum seekers and has now ordered that for sixty days the government will issue no green cards, which grant immigrants permanent residency and the right to work in the United States.

The pandemic also disproportionately affects women. Many are homecare workers, nursing home workers and other low-wage caregivers with less protection. Women make up 87% of registered nurses and 71% of cashiers. There is also concern that under stay-at-home orders women are experiencing more domestic violence. At the same time, conservative officials in Ohio, Mississippi, and Texas have declared abortions to be “non-essential” and have suspended the procedure during the coronavirus pandemic. The courts have overruled some of those orders.

Workers have engaged in protests and strikes in various industries across the United States. Nurses, demanding better protection, have held both local demonstrations and a coordinated national demonstration organized with the assistance of the labor education center *Labor Notes* on April 15. There have also been over 100 strikes at various workplaces from shipyards, to warehouses, to grocery stores. In Vermont University workers organized a petition campaign and a car caravan and fought successfully to prevent the closing of three out of four of the state’s college campuses. Amazon workers have organized a series of protests and walkouts.

The Drive to Reopen the Economy

While the United States coronavirus outbreak peaked two weeks ago, many states have not yet reached their peaks, yet some are considering ending social distancing and permitting the reopening of businesses. Republican governors in Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee have called for reopening their states within days. Public health experts argue that states should not attempt to reopen their economies until there is adequate testing, contact tracing, isolation and monitoring. At present no state has adequate testing and contract tracing is far beyond the capacity of state health departments. If states do reopen their economies, many health experts think that we can expect a second wave of the virus with more illness and deaths. And that would mean closing businesses again. No vaccine is likely to be discovered, tested, mass produced and distributed to tens of millions in less than 18 months. Covid-19 and the flu could wreak havoc in the fall. Some health experts say that social distancing will have to continue until 2022.

Thunder on the Right and Lightning on the Left

Far right groups in almost half of the fifty states have organized protests demanding that states reopen business. Those pushing for ending restrictions and reopening the society include businesspeople, Republican politicians, some Evangelical churches, anti-vaccination groups, and right-wing organizations from armed militias to political organizations such as Freedom Works, Tea Party Patriots, and Save Our Country, as well as white nationalists like the Proud Boys and The Patriot Front. Many of these groups have ties to the Republican Party, to the White House, and to the Trump campaign. Trump has tweeted support for the protests. Some of the demonstrations have violated state social distancing orders and others have included men carrying guns. Protesters wear “Make America Great Again” caps, carry American flags, hold up posters Trump’s name, or signs saying things like “Live Free or Die.” Some in these protests believe that the pandemic is a hoax, others think it was a plot by the Chinese, some claim to have the cure. Ironically those in the demonstrations stand close to one another without masks and may be endangering themselves and

others. These demonstrations of hundreds or at most a few thousand do not represent more than the small minority of 12 percent of all Americans who, according to polls, want restrictions ended.

The American left has no political party and therefore little voice and less weight in Congress. The Democratic Party's Progressive Caucus pushes for more money for small business and workers, but does not have great impact. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of that caucus, whose district is in the "epicenter of the epicenter" and who is seen by many as the potential successor to Bernie Sanders, was the only Democrat to vote against the second stimulus bill with its gifts to business, and she is calling for a freeze on rents.

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the country's largest socialist organization with 60,000 members, had endorsed Sanders but will not endorse Joe Biden, though many can be expected to vote for him. DSA and others on the left are involved in mutual aid projects and in worker organizing as well as social movements. DSA has formed an alliance with *Labor Notes* and with the small United Electrical Workers Union (UE) and has been working with nurses, teachers, truck drivers and warehouse workers. The left is also engaged in work around immigrant rights. The struggle goes on.