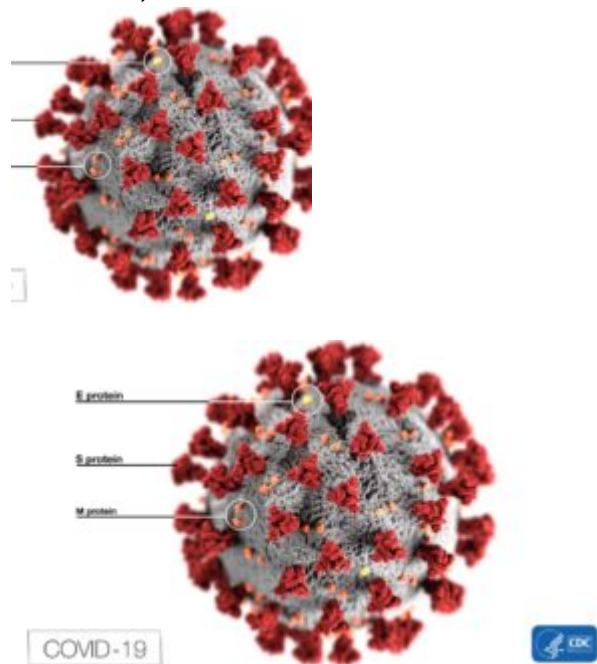


Coronavirus Pandemic Exposes Inhumanity of Capitalism. What Can Socialists Do?

March 15, 2020



There are over 130,000 known cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19) worldwide so far and the death toll so far has been reportedly over 5,000. The numbers are increasing daily and in some cases could also be highly understated. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the situation a pandemic.

The virus emerged in early December 2019 in Wuhan China. Some scientists have argued that the emergence of such viruses in humans are caused by an industrial intensive capitalist agricultural/farming system (backed by states) that creates a rift between our economies and ecologies.

Since the coronavirus is an animal virus which has just recently transferred to humans, not much is known about its long-term consequences. We know that it is very contagious and that those who catch it might not show symptoms for two weeks, but in the meantime communicate it to others. Its symptoms can be fever, a dry cough, a headache, gastrointestinal problems among others. We also know that while it is more deadly than known types of influenza, those who are younger or have a strong immune system, or are not constantly exposed to it as care providers, can survive it. Whether it can remain dormant in the body of humans and mutate or periodically reactivate and cause symptoms in the body of a cured person is not known.

On December 30, when a courageous Chinese ophthalmologist, Dr. Li Wenliang in Wuhan tried to warn his medical school classmates about this mysterious illness, he was immediately arrested by Chinese authorities and forced to confess to spreading "lies." The Chinese government tried to hide the seriousness of this communicable disease and did not galvanize into action until January 20. By not moving aggressively to warn the public and medical professionals, it lost one of its best chances to keep the disease from becoming an epidemic.

Despite China's 6% annual economic growth rate, large hospitals with state of the art technology and medical specialists, China's state capitalist system does not have a functioning primary care

system which is needed to stop communicable diseases such as the influenza. Since late January, it has tried to address the problem of the spread of the coronavirus through quarantining the entire population of the Hubei Province where Wuhan is located and has also put hundreds of millions of others throughout China under lock-down.

Its effort to hide the epidemic, its authoritarian lock-down and its inhuman attitude toward those who have contracted the virus and those who have lost loved ones, has created a great deal of anger and resentment inside China. This anger is being openly expressed by people on social media despite the fear of arrest by the authorities. Many Chinese citizens who held the regime in high esteem up until a few months ago, have changed their minds.

The Chinese government's attempts to cover up the virus spread, however, are not a Chinese phenomenon. Rob Wallace, evolutionary biologist, author of *Big Pharma Makes Big Flu*, argues that "The U.S. and Europe have served as ground zeros for new influenzas as well, recently H5N2 and H5Nx, and their multinationals and neocolonial proxies drove the emergence of Ebola in West Africa and Zika in Brazil. U.S. public health officials covered for agribusiness during the H1N1 (2009) and H5N2 outbreaks."

In Iran which has one of the worst cases of the epidemic after China, Iran's authoritarian government also hid the emergence of the epidemic there and did not inform the public of the gravity of the situation until late February. The Iranian state knew about the coronavirus spread before the parliamentary elections, but did not make announcement about it due to the fear of its impact on the election turnout (which was low). Also for ideological, political and economic reasons, the state refused to put the city of Qom, its religious center, under quarantine, and also did not introduce testing for at risk people and travelers. While many offices and workplaces are still operating inside Iran, the majority of the population are staying at home and do not have access to medical care, much less minimum dietary needs, or clean air or clean water. The economy has long been collapsing under the weight of Iran's military interventions in the region, and U.S. sanctions. According to a just published petition by socialist and labor activists, "on a daily basis tens of people die in the shantytowns and are buried without any record of their deaths . . . The death rate among the poor is so severe that corpses are buried in mass graves or burned." Satellite images of mass graves have also been published by the New York Times and Guardian newspapers.

Italy which also has one of the worst cases of the epidemic after China has imposed a lock-down on the entire population. Japan and South Korea are also facing a major spread of the virus. These and other countries in Europe, the Middle East as well as India are now taking drastic measures to face the epidemic. Measures have ranged from testing, quarantines and closing schools and public gatherings to restricting travel and closing borders.

In the U.S., the news of the epidemic was met with a dismissive attitude by the Trump administration and later the banning of travelers from China and most recently from 26 countries in Europe. Even though the U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, had learned about the gravity of this issue as early as January 3 and had reportedly told Trump about it in late January, Trump did not make his first public speech about this epidemic until February 23 after returning from his official state visit to India. Government test kits provided to the public were faulty, and new test kits were not provided until a few days ago. In addition, the Trump administration's budget cuts during the past three years, have destroyed the precious networks and program that had been built in the U.S. to prevent epidemics. Trump has now appointed his religious fundamentalist and racist vice-president, Mike Pence, who has a history of lack of concern for the AIDS epidemic, as the czar in charge of the nationwide response to the coronavirus epidemic. All information from public health agencies given to the public, has to be approved by him and his office first.

Economically, the pandemic has led to a global crisis of the scale of 2008. It has caused massive decreases in production, travel, consumption and has most recently led to an oil price war between Mohammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Vladimir Putin of Russia to bring down the price of oil to capture each other's markets and to compete with the U.S. shale oil market. The U.S., which had recently become a world leader in the sale of shale oil, is losing its oil profits.

The response of the Trump administration to the current economic crisis was a proposed bailout package for the airline industry and the shale oil industry. Trump also proposed an \$800 billion payroll tax without determining how the social security fund which relies on those taxes would be replenished. By March 13, he was forced to accept a proposed bill from the Democrats for free coronavirus testing, paid sick and family leave, and food assistance for poor families.

Much has yet to be learned about how the coronavirus is affecting various countries and how they are responding to it. What we do know is that the response to the pandemic by various states has focused on quarantining, "social distancing", partial testing, wearing masks and gloves, disinfecting the body or various surfaces, closing schools, limiting travel and closing borders.

What can socialists do to make a difference?

The coronavirus pandemic is not only a health crisis. It is also a social problem rooted in the inhumanity of the capitalist system.

First, we need to change the dominant discourse from one focused on fear of "the other" to one that challenges the capitalist system's failure to put humanity and nature at the center of our concerns. There are structural reasons that prevent capitalism from prioritizing public health.

Capitalism, whether private as in the U.S. or state as in China and Russia and former so-called socialist states, is a system based on the accumulation of value as an end in itself. Thus it puts the accumulation of profit above human health, human needs and the health of the environment. It can build fancy hospitals with specialists but ignore preventive medical care for the masses. It cuts health budgets and makes the poor and the working-class expendable, while it spends billions on the military and wars.

Furthermore, Capitalism depends on the uninterrupted circulation of goods and people to enable continued capital accumulation. Fighting the coronavirus pandemic requires far-reaching restrictions on that circulation. Since a work stoppage for one company means a handicap under competitive conditions, all companies patiently wait on the decision of the paternalistic state to intervene so that they can be assured of a level playing field. What this means, in short, is that companies see a financial gamble as more dangerous than a gamble with public health. They will deal with a public health crisis only after they can make sure that they will not pay the price for it.

It is in this context that we can understand the U.S. Federal Reserve's latest decision to inject \$1.5 trillion in loans into the banking system and broadening of its purchases of Treasury securities.

Secondly, we need to talk about the need for safe and healthy working conditions, universal health care with paid sick leave, healthy nutrition, clean air and clean water for all as the ways to strengthen our immune systems and fight this virus or any other virus which might become widespread in the future. We need scientific research not guided by profit-making.

Thirdly, we need human solidarity across borders. This virus does not know borders. It is not a "Chinese virus." It is a virus that transmits through the air and in ways that might not even involve direct contact with those who have it. The current large population of displaced people around the world such as the more than million Syrian refugees in Idlib and on the border between Syria and

Turkey or Turkey and Greece are already suffering greatly from the lack of concern of the world community about the bombings of the Syrian, Russian and Iranian governments. They and many other Syrians have been bombed, starved, imprisoned and forced to flee their homes because they dared to rise up against the brutal and authoritarian Assad regime in 2011. There are also tens of thousands of migrants suffering in refugee camps at the southern U.S. border and in U.S. detention centers.

Fourthly, we need to talk about the effect of the virus on the incarcerated. In China, close to one million people of Muslim faith in the province of Xinjiang are being held in forced labor and re-education camps. There is an unknown number of other political prisoners in China. In Syria, there are at least 100,000 political prisoners. In Iran, 7,000-9,000 mostly youth were detained during the uprising against the Iranian regime in November 2019. Many other political prisoners including feminist activists, labor union leaders, teachers, environmental activists, members of oppressed national and religious minority groups are serving long prison sentences. Some have contracted the coronavirus and others are in danger of contracting it. In the U.S. there are 2.3 million incarcerated persons. Russia, India and Brazil also have very large prison populations. We need to oppose the carceral system and point out how the latest pandemic adds to all the injustices that prisoners are suffering around the world.

The capitalist system is not capable of dealing with the current pandemic without resorting to more authoritarian means and denying care to a large number of the sick. If we accept the discourse of fear as the solution to this pandemic, we will only open the door to further authoritarian measures and more pandemics.

Closing schools and college campuses and workplaces can be a positive move if we see it as a strike against this inhuman system but not if it leads to becoming fearful of our co-workers, classmates, immigrants and people of other countries. Progressive movements today must be exemplary in terms of solidarity and learning to be careful about not spreading diseases. Individual and collective actions are not contrary but complementary because individual responsibility for fighting a pandemic also involves a collective response. We need to mobilize but under new and safer circumstances.

During the past year, we have seen uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Haiti, Chile, Iran, and mass protests in Hong Kong and France, and most recently mass women's protests against femicide in Latin America. There is no shortage of dissatisfaction and desire for deep social transformation around the world. There have also been laudable efforts in mutual aid across the world. In Italy, France and the U.K., doctors and nurses are protesting online for better sanitary conditions and better working conditions.

The situation that has arisen in response to the coronavirus can either take this dissatisfaction in a revolutionary direction or be used to promote more fear, hatred and separation between peoples of the world. Capitalist authoritarianism and lack of transparency on the part of governments will make the situation much worse. Promoting genuine freedom of information and expression in contrast to fake news and "post-truth" is urgently needed. It is up to socialists to promote a humanist discourse and vision that puts the overcoming of the inhuman capitalist system on the agenda.

An Iranian socialist feminist, Mahtab Dehqan, states the case well when she writes: "Confronting this threat is not possible through governments' declaring a state of emergency or closing borders and closing communications. Confronting the coronavirus or any other widespread danger is only possible through multicultural and transnational organizing from below and sharing our common wealth, knowledge, health and food resources."

Statement by the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists, March 13, 2020.