

Socialist Organizing in the Era of COVID-19

This is the transcript of a talk originally given on April 4, 2020 as part of an online meeting titled "[Coronavirus, Crisis and Class Struggle](#)," co-sponsored by New Politics.



I work in public health in San Francisco, providing specialty mental healthcare to people living in public housing. My employer is UCSF, which is the largest healthcare provider in the Bay Area and is currently the primary provider for COVID-19 patients in the city. The people that I work with are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 and survive on Social Security and disability benefits in what is the most expensive city for rent.

I want to start by talking a bit about the mental health impacts of the pandemic and the economic crisis by saying, first, that we should expect a rapid increase in people experiencing depression and anxiety and trauma. More than ten million people filed for unemployment in the last two weeks of March in the United States. This figure will continue to grow and we will see a whole set of public sector layoffs coming after the new budgets are passed. Not knowing how you will pay rent or how you will afford food is very traumatic, and we're having to cope with this new normal while physically distancing ourselves from the people we care most about.

Human connection is just as important as food, water, and shelter, and when people are increasingly living alone, and now sheltering in place, this lack of connection contributes to a variety of potential diseases and mental-health

conditions. Depression is the leading cause of disability globally, and we should expect this trend to continue as more people's lives are spent alone and afraid. I think that what is required is physical distancing, not social isolation, and I think you really have to find ways to reach out and stay connected to people.

Those of us deemed essential workers must go through a daily risk assessment every time we leave our homes. Many of us will already have had coworkers die, family members infected and sick, and have little time to mourn their losses before we have to get back to work.

All of these factors are likely to increase suicide rates that were already at a high point in the United States before the pandemic. With no clear end point in sight, we're trapped in a state of hyper-vigilance, trying to prepare for the worst while not knowing what is going to happen next. Needless to say, this is all very bad for our health, and we will all have to work very hard to take care of our mental health.

While it is certainly true that COVID-19 as a virus does not discriminate, the impacts of COVID-19 do, [as other speakers have said](#). Those who are most vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed, will bear the greatest burden of disease. People who experience systematic racism, poverty, and mental illness, are more likely to have compromised immune systems, be exposed to air pollution, and find themselves in institutions due to the lack of a social safety-net that has left them isolated, marginalized, and disenfranchised.

Right-wing politicians have suggested that either we save the economy, or we save human beings. Under capitalism, people who aren't able to sell their labor power are considered surplus because capitalists cannot find a way to exploit them profitably. Millions of people fall into this category, whether it's due to aging, disability, incarceration, etc. And these institutional sites are now hotspots for COVID-19

mortality and spread.

Just as an example, my aunt is an occupational therapist at a skilled-nursing facility here in the Bay Area, where ten other occupational therapists have tested positive. At many of these sites, the infection rates are upward of 50 percent among patients, and her employer actually asked her and others to return to work within a week of testing positive. So, there's very little regulation and poor workplace safety requirements.

The pandemic is putting a magnifying glass on how incompatible the capitalist system is with providing for human needs. The U.S. government has shown that it is capable of printing trillions of dollars out of thin air to bail out corporations, yet for the past 50 years we've been told that funding for social welfare, public housing, and public education must be cut because they're a drain on our resources. As long as healthcare, housing, and food are commodities rather than universal rights, social inequality will continue to define who lives and who dies.

Even countries with more robust social-welfare states have struggled to respond to COVID-19, largely due to neoliberal cuts to welfare spending and a basic lack of planning or preparation for a pandemic. The manufactured scarcity of ventilators, safety equipment, and testing has led to nightmare situations across the globe, where overwhelmed doctors are tasked with the ethics of rationing life-saving care.

The Italian College of Anesthesia, Analgesia, Resuscitation and Intensive Care developed [formal guidelines](#) on the ethics of rationing care. Informed by the principle of maximizing benefits for the largest number, the authors suggest "the allocation criteria need to guarantee that those patients with the highest chance of therapeutic success will retain access to intensive care." This means that those who need the most care will receive the least, and those who have experienced

more hardship in their lives are deemed less likely to respond well to treatment.

Disability rights groups have challenged rationing guidelines in states like Alabama, Kansas, Tennessee, and Washington that actually allow doctors to withhold care from people with disabilities. [Alabama's emergency operation plan](#), for example, says that "persons with severe or profound mental retardation ... are unlikely candidates" for life-saving care if there is a shortage of supplies like ventilators.

As some of the other speakers have said, [it's going to be a very, very hard crisis](#). The silver lining to all this is that without struggle there is no progress. People are being forced into struggle by this crisis. People are organizing rent strikes for the first time. We have already seen a number of successful wildcat strikes. People are finding creative ways to maintain their humanity amidst the pandemic by reclaiming their labor power to fight for demands like sick leave, hazard pay, workplace safety, which are demands that strengthen the entire working class.

Class tensions have been sharpened since the last economic crisis, and I think we can say that we're in a better position as a left today that we were in 2008-9. The subsequent mass revolts have radicalized and organized millions of people, so we're not starting from scratch. [A socialist movement is being revived](#), and people are watching in real time how the capitalist system drives their lives into chaos again and again. Not to mention that there is an entire generation of zoomers—Generation Z—who will be further radicalized by the way capitalism is shaping their horizons.

So, what are some of the immediate questions and demands that are presented by this pandemic? Obviously, what people mentioned, there are immediate demands around redistribution of resources that need to be implemented to stem the spread of COVID and hopefully prevent the deaths of hundreds of

thousands of people.

People may have seen [General Electric workers walked out](#) and protested to demand that their idle factories be used to produce ventilators.

In San Francisco, socialist supervisor Dean Preston started [housing homeless people in vacant hotel rooms](#) out of his own pocket, but then put pressure on the Board of Supervisors to now contract with hotels to house healthcare workers and homeless people who have tested positive and need to quarantine. We should be demanding that local governments expand this and house all people who need to shelter in place.

There are a ton of important legislative reforms that we need to win that people have mentioned, including sick leave; moratoriums on evictions, foreclosures, utility cutoffs; debt forgiveness; the suspension of ICE and CBP enforcement; permanent protections for Medicare and Social Security.

All of this, I think, puts the question of labor strategy at the forefront. Many of these reforms will be won within unionized workforces that can push for class-wide demands like hazard pay, sick leave, workplace protections.

But our labor organizing is going to have to be focused also on organizing the unorganized. As we've seen with Amazon and Instacart workers, there is a genuine desire to fight and to get organized. Many of these workers will want to form unions. Many of them will need to continue to break the rules, challenge the authoritarianism of their bosses, and many of them will want to join a socialist movement.

With shelter-in-place orders and physical-distancing enforcement, we have to get creative in our tactics. But that doesn't mean that we can abandon in-person protests altogether. We have seen the successful press conferences organized by nurses and hospital workers, who are able to get their voices out into national news and put pressure on

politicians to respond. We've seen neighborhoods around hospitals showing solidarity with nurses and hospital workers.

I think we have to think about if there's a way to connect the car-honking protest with the workplace actions, with neighborhood support. What happens when schools start in the fall? How do we build solidarity between those on the frontlines and those who are staying home?

There's also the question of who will pay for the pandemic. Unfortunately, the stimulus bill—dubbed by Jeremy Scahill as a "[Reverse Robin Hood](#)"—provides very little for the 99 percent and gives trillions to corporations, which will contribute to greater inequality. So, we're going to have to fight for a people's bailout in opposition to this corporate giveaway, focusing on providing relief to those who need it most.

As I mentioned, in July we're likely to see a lot of layoffs in the public sector. Budgets will be looking to reduce their workforces to only the most essential and productive, so we'll continue to see austerity in many cities.

And we also have a presidential election in November. I think most people have accepted that the DNC has been successful in making sure that Bernie will not be the presidential nominee, and I think the pandemic will contribute to demoralization and lesser-evilism, as Bernie will likely support Biden against Trump, like the rest of the Democratic Party. However, we should still demand safe voting practices to allow the greatest participation possible. And we should not let lesser-evilism undermine the independent organizing efforts that will be necessary to survive this pandemic.

In the Bay Area, some of the local election campaigns have shown a real opening for left politics. These are opportunities to get explicitly socialist programs into mass politics and build a link between formal politics and the social struggles and movements. I think the DSA is positioned

to be able to take advantage of these opportunities in many cities.

I think we also have to say that social reproduction will be a key site of struggle for the future. In California, Gavin Newsom is pumping public funds into recruiting nurses and med students into a [statewide health corps](#). As people have mentioned, the struggle around healthcare will have lasting effects on [our ability to get Medicare For All](#) and determine how prepared we are for the next crisis.

The restaurant industry has been effectively shut down and forced to transform itself to survive COVID. And, just an example, in San Francisco there's been what's called a [San Francisco New Deal](#), where the tech industry is funding restaurants to provide free meals to the most vulnerable in San Francisco. Again, this shows what is possible—that it's possible to organize food differently to meet human needs.

We're already seeing drastic cuts in public transit due to shelter-in-place orders, and politicians will use this as an excuse to lay off workers, no doubt. And we have to continue to fight for the right to the city.

In the fall, families and students are going to have to fight around the normalization of distance learning and online education as replacements for social pedagogy. We've already seen the [impact that teachers have had on mass consciousness](#) and we're likely to see that wave continue through the healthcare and other public sectors.

Capitalism has been exposed once again as a system that benefits the one percent at the expense of the rest of us and the planet. There are many links between [climate change and the pandemic](#). State-subsidized agribusiness and factory farms, and the encroachment of urbanization and industry into the wild, create greater opportunities for viruses to develop and spread from animals to humans.

Rosa Luxemburg popularized the slogan "Socialism or Barbarism" to describe the challenge for revolutionaries in a period of world war, colonization, and expansion of the extractive industries. Today this slogan is still relevant for those who believe another world is possible and who want to be a part of dismantling the capitalist system.

Lastly, I would just say that the first step right now is to get organized, whether that's in your local DSA chapters, unions, neighborhood councils. I just joined the DSA in San Francisco because of the national response that DSA had around COVID-19. The DSA is a national organization but it needs to be democratized, diversified, and to expand the bulk of its activities beyond the ballot box. But I think we have a real chance to get serious about mobilizing the people that are organized, organizing the unorganized, and fighting for a better future.