

# “What if?” COVID-19, Trump and Class Struggle in America

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When I first wrote this article on Friday, March 27, the Covid-19 death toll in the US had surpassed 1,600, although casualties are mounting so fast this number will seem impossibly old in a day or two. By April 2 the number of deaths passed 5,000. More than 200,000 cases have been confirmed, but the total is likely ten times greater as testing remains criminally restricted by a lack of kits. Nearly half of those cases are within fifty miles of Manhattan and there is no end in sight.

Additionally, unemployment claims topped 3 million this past week, five times greater than the previous record set in 1982 at the height of the Reagan Recession. The current unemployment number significantly under-counts those who have lost their jobs because the system simply couldn't process all the claims; millions who do not know they are eligible for benefits; and millions more who are simply crossing their fingers that things will “go back to normal” in a couple weeks.

Donald Trump, the self-described “stable genius,” didn't see it coming. “It's going to disappear. One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear... maybe go away. We'll see what happens. Nobody really knows.”

But front-line health care workers knew we were all skating on thin ice. “I work in a pediatric emergency room,” explains New York City nurse Sean Petty. “When our staffing started to get cut, we complained... We were told explicitly by management that we can no longer staff based on a “what if” scenario. Well, of course, an emergency room is one giant “what if” scenario in normal times, but then “what if” a pandemic comes?”

There is nothing accidental about the fact that the U.S. health care system is uniquely ill-prepared to confront the coronavirus contagion. As Mike Davis, author of *The Monster at the Door*, explains, “According to the American Hospital Association, the number of in-patient hospital beds declined by an extraordinary 39% between 1981 and 1999. The purpose was to raise profits... But management's goal of 90% occupancy meant that hospitals no longer had the capacity to absorb patient influx during epidemics and medical emergencies.” Covid-19 does the killing, but two generations of

neoliberal austerity drove us to the slaughterhouse doors.

## **Health Care in America**

Most obviously, the coronavirus has called the American health care system's bluff. As socialist presidential candidate Bernie Sanders says in every speech, "30,000 American die every year waiting for health care because of the cost." Meanwhile, big pharmaceutical companies and private health insurance companies reaped one-hundred billion in profits last year, literally sucking the life out of American workers. All along, Republicans have claimed that America's health care system was the "best in the world" while Democrats like presidential front-runner Joe Biden claim the system needs minor tweaks, to "expand on Obamacare." The coronavirus has laid those myths to rest once and for all.

## **We're Capitalists**

Ronald Reagan justified his attacks on working-class living standards by claiming that benefits would "trickle down" from the top to the bottom. Since then, if the Democratic and Republican leadership have agreed on nothing else, they have united behind Margaret Thatcher's "There Is No Alternative" (TINA) banner, swearing allegiance to free markets and the 1 percent. As Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi put it, "we're capitalists, that's just the way it is." Progressive Senator Elizabeth Warren is even more insistent, claiming she is "a capitalist to my bones."

The results? Neoliberalism has wrecked working-class life in the United States. Real wages are the same today as in 1970, and they will be driven down significantly in emerging recession. The average college student graduates with \$30,000 in debt. 2.3 million people are in prison today, of whom 40 percent are African American. Women make only 82 cents to the dollar compared to men in comparable jobs and 17 military veterans commit suicide every day. 41 percent of transgender people, and 54 percent of transgender people of color, report having attempted suicide. Nearly 12 million workers do not have documents and millions of immigrant workers have been caged and deported by Obama and Trump alike over the last decade. Public schools are radically underfunded to the tune of almost \$2 billion per year. And the federal minimum wage has remained stuck at \$7.25 per hour for a decade, approximately 50 percent lower than it was in real dollars in 1970.

On top of all of this, today's youth live in fear of school shootings, climate disaster, and declining economic prospects. If today's teenagers and twentysomethings are neoliberalism's grandchildren, then they are the Great Recession's children... and they know it.

## **The Center Holds, For Now**

Politically, Trump broke the mold. He has rehabilitated white supremacy in official Republican politics, cut the American-led international trade regime to ribbons, up-ended the "norms" of the U.S. state (the real motivation behind Pelosi's failed impeachment bid), and adopted a far-right, isolationist view.

Yet, despite all this, Republicans and Democrats in Congress, along with Trump himself, put aside their cold war to unite behind the largest economic bail-out package in history in little more than a week. It is true that they bickered around the edges, but when the coronavirus posed a threat to Wall Street and big business, there was never any doubt they would come to a consensus whose tracks were laid back in 2009 under the Obama bail-out, which included the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program.

Although more than four times as large, Trump's bail out is built around the same core as Obama's

bail out: \$500 billion for corporate relief with little to no oversight. Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell claimed the crisis called for “a wartime level of investment into our nation,” which is true enough insofar as McConnell sees the “nation” as an interlocking boys club of CEOs. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve has pledged to provide Wall Street and the big banks virtually unlimited free credit to protect their balance sheets.

Alongside the torrent of aid to big business, the deal directs \$100 billion towards emergency aid for hospitals and \$350 billion to small businesses, extends unemployment benefits and increase payments by up to \$600 per worker – thanks to Sanders fighting for it – and will send one-time \$1200 checks to most workers, with an additional \$500 per child. Undoubtedly, the emergency measures will be popular in the short term (Trump is betting his reelection on federal largesse), but as Laia Facet predicts with respect to Spain, “If the government continues its elevated public spending policies without taking any extraordinary measures to tax big business in order to raise money, then the public debt will rise and, just like in 2008, they will turn to austerity to cover it.”

Remember, what followed Obama’s bail out was not a return to prosperity and a rise in living standards, but rather a remorseless cut in living standards and emergence of Occupy Wall Street. “The banks got bailed out, we got sold out!” went the cry. The 1 percent is preparing to repeat the trick this time around, but the 99 percent today is angrier, poorer, and better organized than in 2009-2011 and the system’s TINA song rings hollower than ever.

### **Socialism, Mutual Aid, and Fight or Die**

During the Great Depression, the Communist Party USA popularized the slogan “Fight or Starve.” All around the world today, the coronavirus is forcing workers to fight or die. Strike actions have proliferated as those workers not laid off are forced to work under increasingly dangerous conditions. Workers have responded to Trump’s desire to have the country “open by Easter” by making #Dontdieforthedow go viral and, more importantly, going on strike to demand that their non-essential businesses close or for medically-necessary protective gear if they have to keep working.

Many corporate chiefs aren’t even willing to wait as long as Trump. UPS package driver Nick Perry writes that “My employer isn’t concerned about exposure. In fact, they are excited for all the business opportunities it will bring... I interact with 75-100 people daily; 300-500 packages move through my hands on a given day. I open who knows how many door handles and touch even more handrails. Two thousand people move through a guard shack at work which you have to push your body against, and all of this is done without a single care from my employer to sanitize *anything*.” This kind of corporate recklessness has unleashed a wave of wildcat strikes in auto, agriculture, Amazon, fast food (including Starbucks), public transportation, and shipbuilding, spreading the lessons learned in strikes by teachers, nurses, and university workers over the last two years.

At the same time, tens of millions of ordinary people are establishing mutual aid groups to help their neighbors, even as they are subject to quarantines or “shelter in place” orders. And with schools closed, educators are working to “thicken networks of collaboration and collective action with parents and students” by continuing classes online, maintaining relationships with their students to counteract isolation and stress, and working alongside school food service workers to deliver tens of millions of free meals to students and their families every day. In the midst of this outpouring of working-class solidarity, the growth of socialist ideas and organization will only accelerate.

### **Can Bernie Beat the Odds?**

All this seemingly stands in contrast to Sanders’ string of losses to Joe Biden in the Democratic Party

primary elections in March, but this is easily explained.

While Sanders' insistence on Medicare for All (a single-payer system) and his calls to tax the rich, strengthen trade unions, raise wages, and embark on a transformative Green New Deal – all under the banner of democratic socialism – have won enormous sympathy, they have not yet won active majority support in the face of withering (and unified) criticism from the right and the centrists. As noted above, not even the very liberal Elizabeth Warren was willing to endorse Sanders after she withdrew from the race. Thus, so long as the centrists divided support amongst themselves, Sanders managed to win important victories based on his plurality of the votes in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada. Yet once the Democratic leadership culled the herd and united behind Biden, Sanders' plurality became a minority.

Paradoxically, African-American voters – the backbone of Biden's wins in South Carolina and after – have suffered disproportionately at the hands of the Democratic Party over the last thirty years. And though Obama's election signaled a blow against racism, African-Americans were the last to benefit from his neoliberal policies. And if Biden himself inspires little enthusiasm among Black voters, serving as Obama's vice president still carries weight. However, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor argues, Biden's success amongst Black voters is complex.

“To many of those marginalized voters, the notion of the political revolution [one of Sanders' main slogans] is an abstraction when they have yet to see any social movement win meaningful reforms. Struggles today remain defensive.... Recall that when teachers across the nation went out on strikes, they were mostly to forestall further cuts, privatization and attacks on the living standards. Black Lives Matter arose in response to debilitating police abuse and violence, but was unable to end it. It doesn't mean that those efforts were futile, but it demonstrates the scale of the challenges to changing, let alone transforming, the status quo.”

Taylor concludes that “It's not that [Bernie's issues] are unpopular – particularly among younger African-American voters – but in the current moment they can seem hopeless.”

So, if before the coronavirus, Bernie's policies had earned the sympathy of majorities, but not yet their active support, what now? Biden's “expand Obamacare” appears ludicrous as tens of millions of people lose their employer-provided health insurance. And he's not helping his case by virtually disappearing during the crisis. Pelosi's “We're capitalists, that's just the way it is,” makes even less sense when your boss is telling you to risk infection in order to deliver junk for Amazon without protective gear. And Trump's “open by Easter” will soon be buried by the crisis. In contrast, Bernie's proposals now appear as prophecies and there is no doubt that his steadfast gospels of Medicare for All, Green New Deal, and Political Revolution are winning over millions of new disciples. But will it be enough to turn the election?

It is impossible to know what the next two weeks will bring, never mind the next two or four months. On the one hand, there is the real-world problem of how to hold an election during a pandemic. Further, as Biden holds a narrow lead as of now, the Democratic Party leadership will most likely try to shut down, or at least constrain, the remaining primary elections making mounting a comeback all but impossible. Not to mention that the crisis and the bailout (and it's “bi-partisan” natures) will tend to call the Democratic Party elite to order behind their corporate funders and centrist leadership. In fact, if Biden cannot find a way to present himself as a competent alternative, one can already hear whispers of a campaign to draft New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo to take over (on a river of cash for billionaire Michael Bloomberg) as the party's candidate. This would be easier said than done and would risk a revolt from Sanders' army of supporters.

## **Fear and Solidarity**

Perhaps a bigger obstacle for Sanders is the nature of crisis itself. Millions are enraged, but we are also quarantined, isolated, and soon-to-be unemployed. We cannot mobilize or march, we can't even knock on doors or go to the voting booths. And worse still, alongside rising anger, there is real (and rational) fear. And when faced with disaster, fear on a mass scale often overshadows solidarity. This is not to say that this crisis will not produce a bigger, better-organized, more-rooted, anti-capitalist left. It certainly will. But scale and timing matters when socialist politics moves beyond principles and programs and tries to enter the field of power. And, while we may be proven right, we may not have time to make ourselves strong enough to inspire a working-class upsurge strong enough to push Bernie into the winner's circle. Trotsky once usefully described the dynamics of defeat and confusion under different circumstances, "The fact that our forecast had proven correct might attract one thousand, five thousand, or even ten thousand new supporters to us. But for the millions, the significant thing was not our forecast, but the fact of the crushing of the Chinese revolution" of 1925-27.

If Trump manages to win reelection in November, he will owe his victory to this dynamic. In fact, Trump's bet is that he can pour money into the credit system to prevent it from freezing, while claiming just enough credit for the scraps doled out to the population for just long enough to beat the lackluster Biden ("Sleep Joe," Trump taunts) in the fall. It is not an impossible bet, but there is no guarantee today's \$2 trillion package will stem the tide and things may spin out of control.

### **Socialists in Covid-19 America**

All we can say for certain is that there is no going back. The next five or ten years will determine whether or not the rage brewing among millions of workers - especially amongst a generation from whom not only their future, but their youth itself, is being robbed - can transform that emotion into action, into organization, and into a political party that puts human need ahead of corporate greed.

Within that context, the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America looms large. The vast majority of DSA's 60,000 members joined in the last three years and the organization has all the difficulties one might expect with such explosive growth. But it has hundreds of locals and branches and working groups in all 50 states. It is open and democratic and its members have drawn strength from how Sanders and its handful of elected officials - including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib - have conducted themselves during this crisis. DSA will grow during this crisis, not as an empty vessel into which thousands looking for an alternative will flow, but because *thousands* of members have thrown themselves into social solidarity in mutual aid campaigns, they are assisting workers taking action on the job, and they do not have it in them to fall in step behind Biden or Cuomo or anyone else. They will keep fighting for Sanders, but as the title of Meagan Day and Micah Uetricht's new books says, this is "Bigger than Bernie."

Over the next few weeks and even months, the response to the coronavirus contagion will be dominated on the national scale by the powers that be. Our side will suffer shock after shock and it will be difficult to get our bearings, even as we fight where we can. But as we fight, the socialist and working-class movement must also think and plan and figure out how to unite behind a focused set of demands that allows us to maximize our strength: How do we win Medicare for All in place of temporary subsidies for Covid-19 testing and subsidies for the private insurance companies? How do we win a massive new jobs program under the umbrella of the Green New Deal in place of one-time \$1,200 checks? How do we include international solidarity in our social solidarity so the Pentagon budget is transferred into no-strings-attached global health investment?

Socialism will emerge from this crisis as a powerful moral force. Learning how to transform that goodwill in the coming years into concrete victories, large and small, is the difference between life and death. And it is the difference between settling for a socialist movement of dissidents and

building a socialist movement with enough social forces behind it to win.

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